THE LOCALS ISSUE // 2015 ACCESSORIES GUIDE + 6 PACKABLE SOLO RIDES

CANOE & KAYAK

BEST SUMMER PADDLING EVENTS

BOUNDARY WATERS:
A FAMILY REUNITES IN CANOE COUNTRY'S SACRED WATER

HOME WATERS

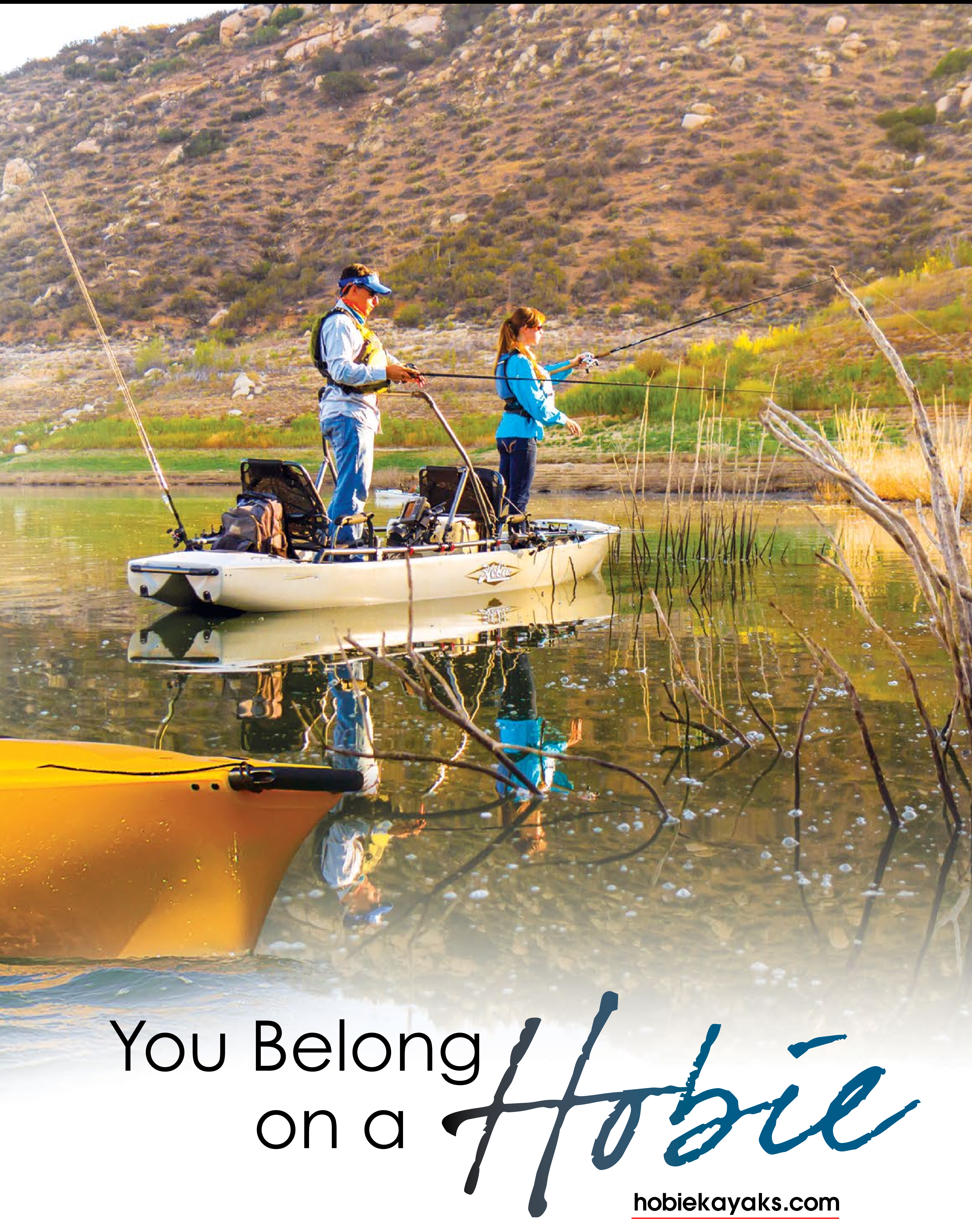
THE 26 BEST PADDLING TOWNS
WHERE TO LIVE AND LAUNCH YOUR NEXT ADVENTURE

BACKPADDLING
M. JOHN FAYHEE
JOURNEYS BACK TO THE WATERWAYS THAT SHAPED HIS YOUTH

TEN THE ENTHUSIAST NETWORK

GULF-TO-ARCTIC / SOUTH GEORGIA ISLAND / BIRTH (AND DEATH) OF A RIVER TOWN

Hobie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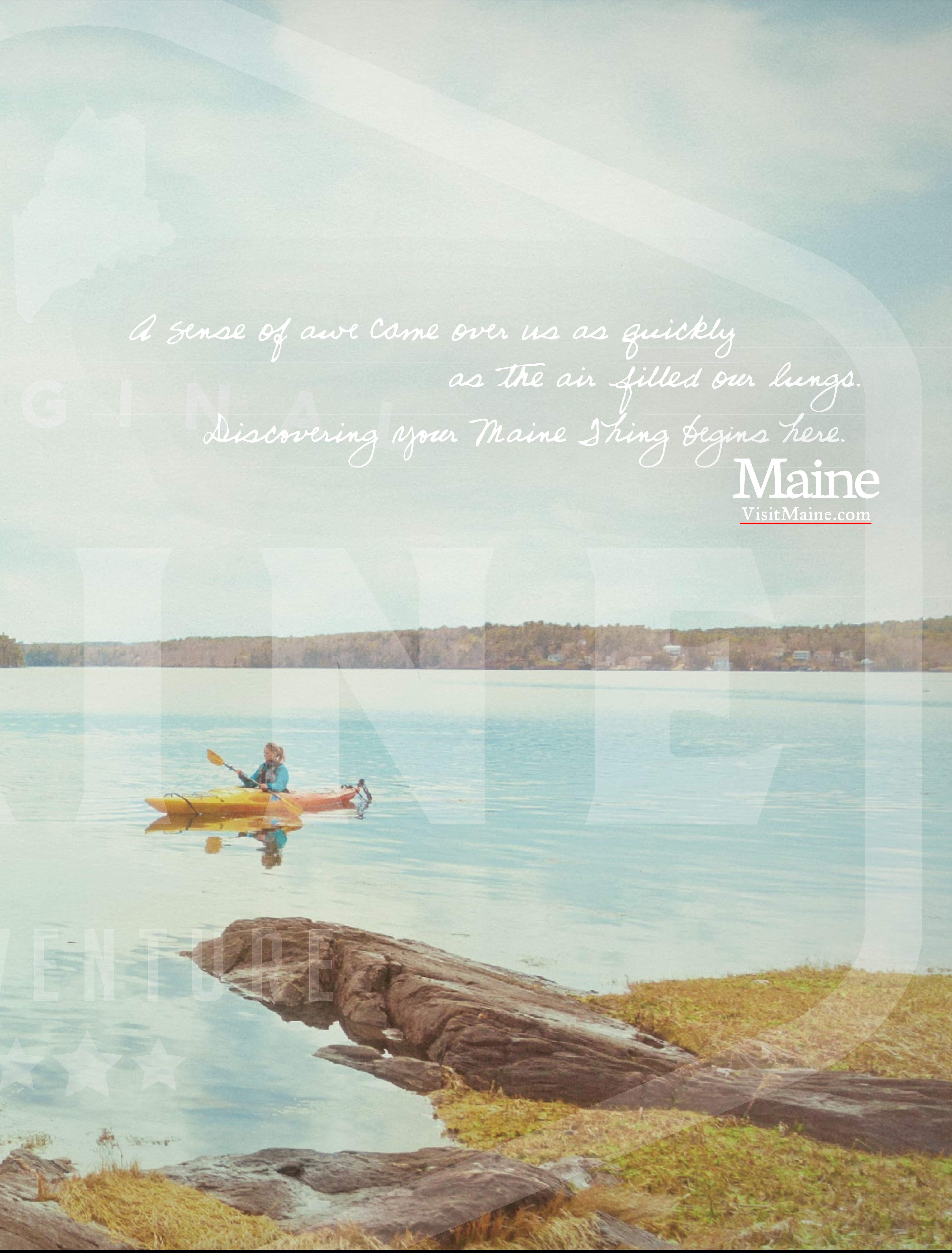
A sense of awe came over us as quickly
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Coming Home

Every few years, almost always by accident, I pass through one of the towns I used to call home. I make the rounds, driving by my old school, stopping in front of the old house. Eventually, I find myself by the water, where the memories always seem to flow best.

Many of you have probably done the same. In this issue, Larry Rice writes about the urban sewer overflow where he learned to love paddling (Aquaphile, p 32). Larry is C&K's longest-serving contributor. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of highly sought paddling destinations throughout North America. He's paddled them all, not to mention dozens of rivers from Grenland to Guatemala. But the stretch of water that touched him most deeply is that unloved canal on the north side of Chicago.

I think most of us can relate. The waters we grow up on, that we paddle in every season and all conditions, are the ones that stay with us.

So if you wonder how a city like Detroit, which has lately become a synonym for urban decay, made our list of North America's Best Paddling Towns (p. 34), this is why. It's full of watery byways and quiet river reaches. A paddler there can truly get to know a piece of water, its mysteries and moods.

Returning to such places after a long absence can be a powerful experience, as M. John Fayhee relates in his masterful feature, Heavy Water (p. 44). Fayhee had been gone nearly 40 years when he returned east to revisit his waterlogged youth with his dog Casey and an inflatable kayak. I won't venture to tell you what he found on Lake Champlain, the Kentucky River and the brackish waters of Gloucester County, Virginia. Fayhee's writing defies such easy description. I'll just say his yarn has adventure and death and sex, and the most fearsome rope swing in history. It meanders like the best of rivers. It draws you in, grows on you, and shares secrets that you didn't know mattered. *–Jeff Moag*

Photo: Jonathon Gruenke

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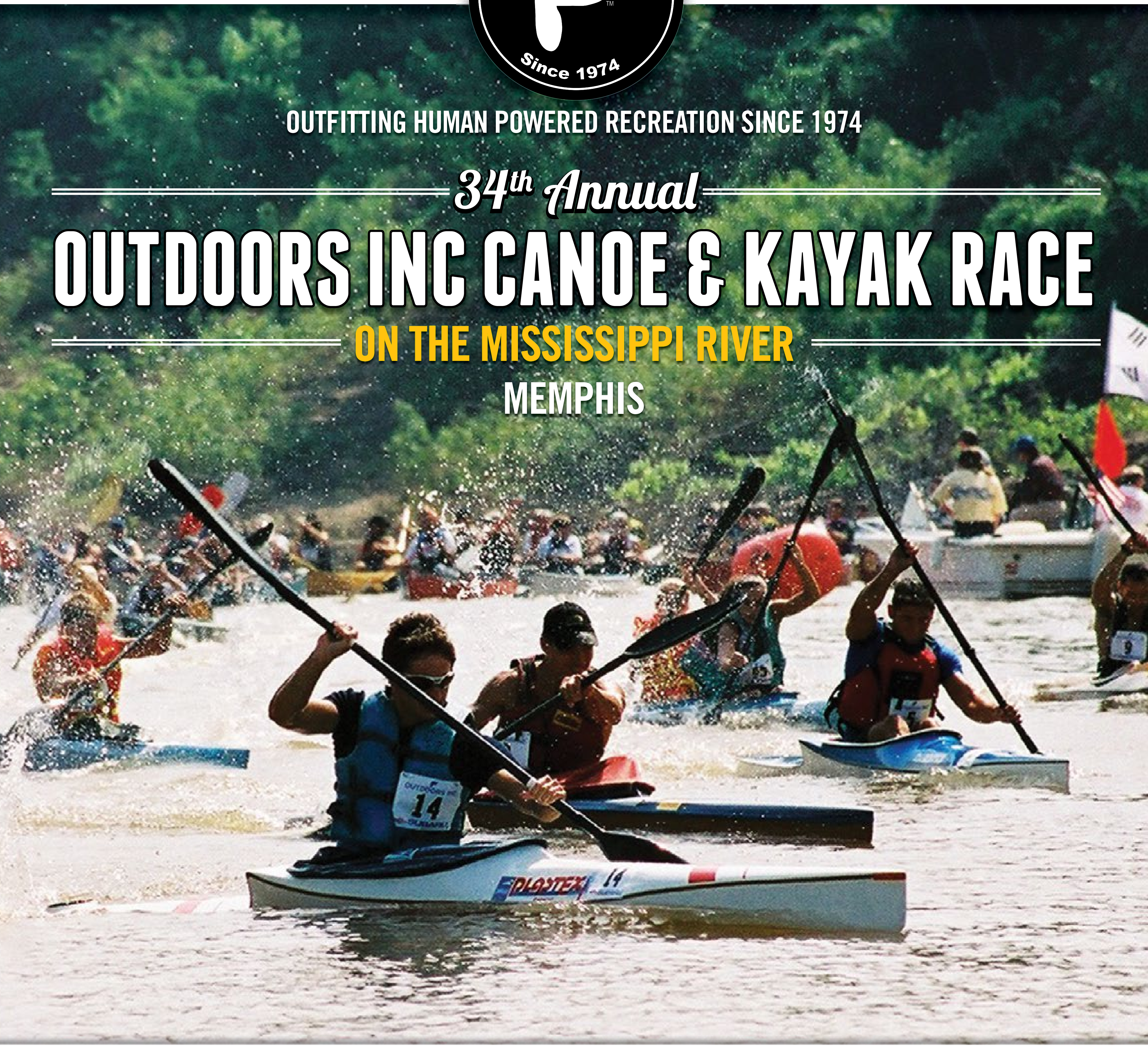

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We crisscross North America, highlighting the greatest towns and cities for paddlers to thrive, or to base your next paddling adventure.

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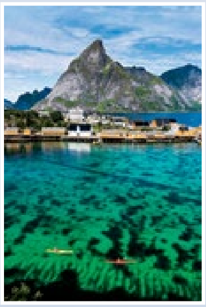
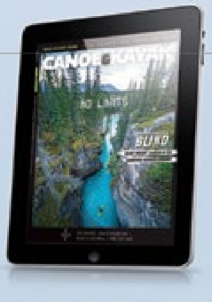


ON THE COVER

Ann-Elin Norddal and Elle Cochrane paddling in Reine, Lofoten Islands, Norway. Photo: Mattias Fredriksson

THIS PAGE Sloane Whelan paddling in Baltimore's Inner Harbor. Photo: Tom McCorkle



ONLINE at CANOEKAYAK.COM: Coverage from the 2015 North Fork Championship, more of Paddling's Top Towns, gear reviews for the runoff, plus voting for this year's Canoe & Kayak Awards.

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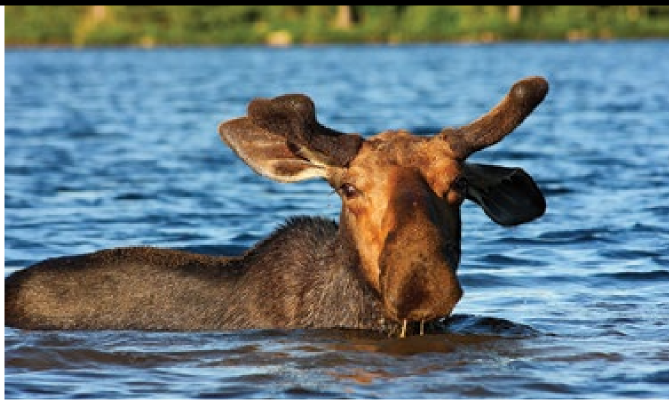

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LETTER OF THE MONTH

2015 PADDLE GUIDE
CANOE&KAYAK
WHAT'S NEXT
PET DRONES // BUG-OUT BOATS // DIY MAPS // THE TRIP OF YOUR LIFE

Aaron Schmidt

OLD SCHOOL AND PROUD

I was encouraged to read the Foreword in your May '15 issue, 'Peak Gadget,' and wanted to welcome you to the fold. It's nice in here. Some of us hear exactly what you're saying and have been practicing "disconnecting/simplifying" for quite a while now. I purchased a GPS unit years ago, used it a couple of times and it has been sitting in a drawer ever since. Give me my compass and a map, thank you very much.

For the record, I'm 53, which I don't consider old by any means, and I'm completely literate in all the modern gadgetry. But when I (fortunately) was able to retire early, it was an easy decision to dial the connectivity/gadgetry back. Self-sufficiency, patience, living in the moment and resiliency are sadly being lost on many, or perhaps most, of us. And for a lot of us, "old school" isn't a negative. We wear that label with honor and pride. I'm thankful to have grown up in a time where today's gadgetry was a dream and we didn't have anything to distract us from the beauty right in front of our eyes.

Paddle on. ***— D.R., Sandpoint, Idaho***

Thanks for the note, D.R. We're sending you a new NRS Vapor PFD to make sure you keep enjoying those unconnected, self-sufficient, and timeless moments on the water.

RE: ONE LIFE (MAY '15)

Just wanted to let you know I really enjoyed your writeup on the Rey del Rio event. I think you captured the spirit of the event and the motivation behind it super well. I also really like how you tied in Juanito [de Ugarte] and focused on the emotions of the kayakers. It's a refreshing article for kayaking, and all the athletes I've talked to are stoked on it! – *Rush S.*

Write us at letters@canoekayak.com.
Letters may be edited for clarity and length.

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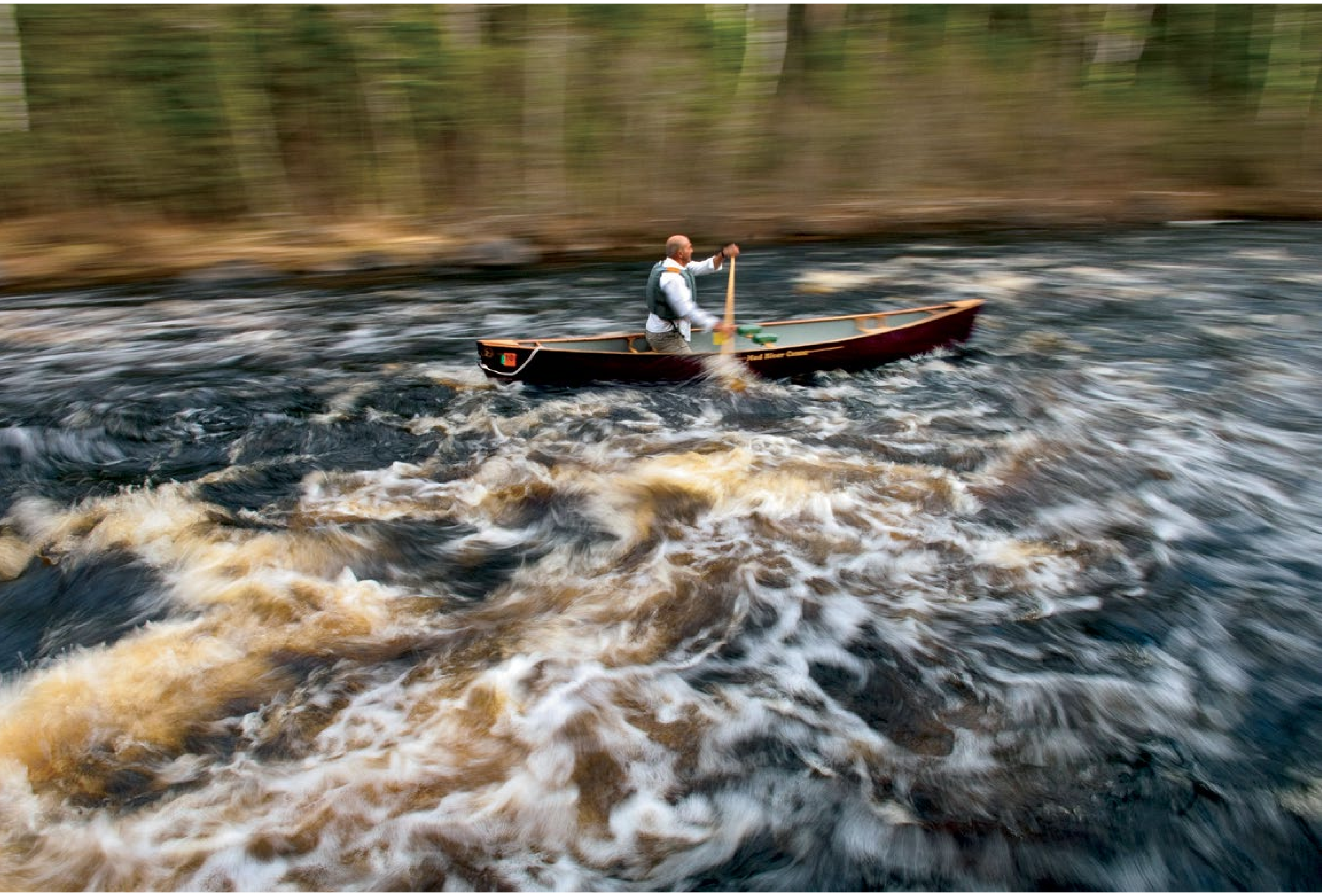
See Trautman's photo essay from a December whitewater journey through Chile at CanoeKayak.com



📷 LAYNE KENNEDY
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≋ CLOQUET RIVER, MINNESOTA

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≋ BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE AREA, ELY FALL LAKE ENTRY

★ Read about the Sundberg's family journey trough the BWCA on page 52

CHRIS PORTER
JOHN JACOBY
SOUTH GEORGIA ISLAND

Go to CanoeKayak.com to read more about Chris Porter, John Jacoby, Andrew Maffett and Jim Bucirde's record-smashing, 13-day circumnavigation of South Georgia Island. The Australian crew, average age 52, is only the fourth group to complete the 310-mile journey around the remote South Atlantic island.

NON-STOP SPEED

THE GRAND CANYON'S FASTEST DESCENTS SET UP THE RACE FOR A NEW RECORD

BY ZAK PODMORE

One reason that a Grand Canyon trip looms atop so many bucket lists is sheer length, both in mileage (277 from Lees Ferry to the Grand Wash Cliffs) and in river days (up to 27 on private winter trips). For a few paddlers, however, traversing the canyon as quickly as possible is an irresistible challenge. The Rigg brothers' 1951 descent in a cataract-style wooden row boat was the first Grand Canyon speed run, setting the bar at just shy of 53 hours. In 2012, Harlan Taney's sea kayak attempt (aborted after an elbow-injuring flip in Grapevine Rapid) revived the race to establish a new record. As rumors mill of another non-stop attempt this season, we highlight the canyon's greatest benchmarks for speed.

YEAR: 1896
PADDLERS: George Flavell and Ramon Montez
CRAFT: Open skiff
TIME: 13 days

Making a 13-day Grand Canyon run is a bit rushed by today's standards, but in the late 19th century, it was record setting. As beaver trappers, Flavell and Montez were the first to run the canyon free from the scientific or surveying agendas of previous expeditions. They were also innovative boatmen, rowing the rapids facing downstream instead of pulling their way through for speed. River historian Tom Martin calls them "The Cheech and Chong of Grand Canyon history," noting how, after an arduous portage of Soap Creek and decision to run every rapid downstream, the duo also made the first known descent of Lava Falls.

YEAR: Late 1970s
PADDLERS: Fletcher Anderson
CRAFT: Fiberglass wildwater boat
TIME: ~ 49 hours

The date is debated. The feat is not. Fletcher Anderson, a Southwest kayak pioneer, made a full solo descent of the Grand in just over 49 hours with no sat-phone, no GPS tracker, no support crew. Walter Kirschbaum had set the solo-paddling speed record—and notched the canyon's first complete kayak descent—in 1960. Paddling a wildwater racing kayak, Anderson made the run in less than half Kirschbaum's time, finishing, as family legend has it, with his forearms so inflamed he had to cut off his paddling jacket.

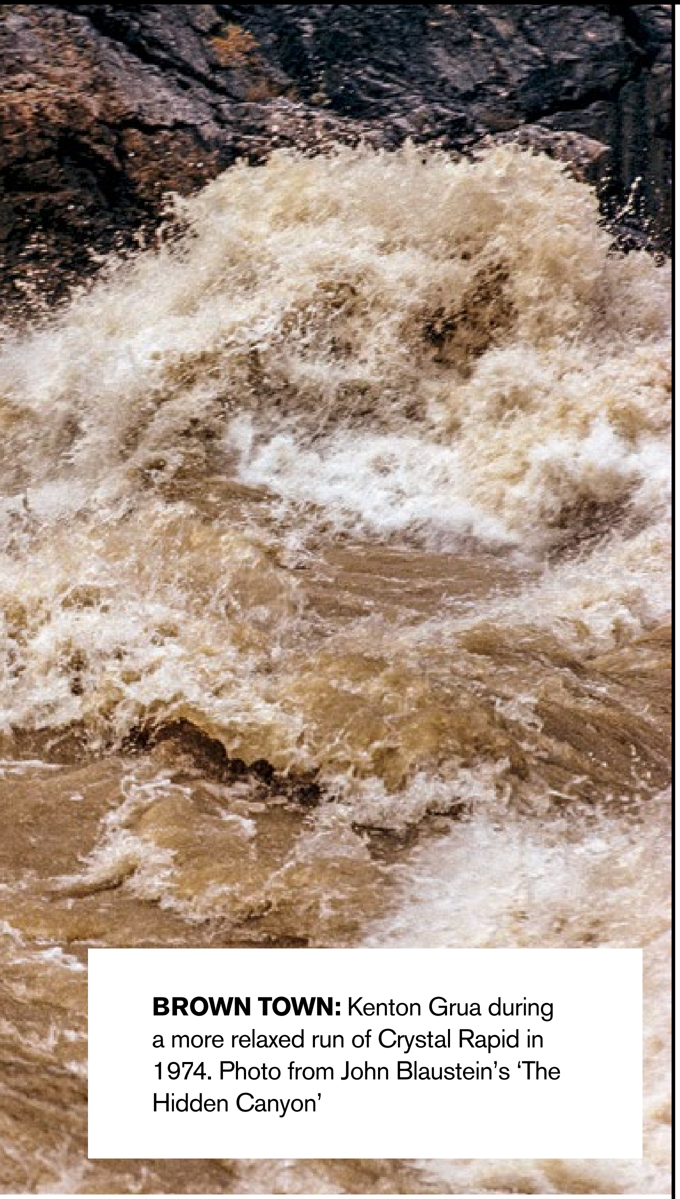
YEAR: 1983
PADDLERS: Kenton Grua, Rudi Petschek, and Steve Reynolds
CRAFT: Wooden dory
TIME: 36 hours, 38 minutes

The legend of *The Emerald Mile*'s flood-stage speed run survived around campfires and guide houses until it was immortalized in Kevin Fedarko's 2014 book of the same name. Taking turns rowing through the night on a surge of over 70,000 cfs—a flow which has not been matched since—the three boatmen evaded park service authorities to make the fabled run. They narrowly averted disaster after flipping in Crystal Rapid.

If kayakers should ever beat their non-motorized record, which has stood for more than 30 years, it won't make this feat any less impressive.

YEAR: 1993
PADDLERS: John Weisheit, John Williams, and Clyde Deal
CRAFT: Motorized rigid inflatable
TIME: 35 hours, 43 minutes

In the summer of 1993, a trio of boatmen from Moab, Utah, ran the length of the canyon in a rigid inflatable sport boat. After

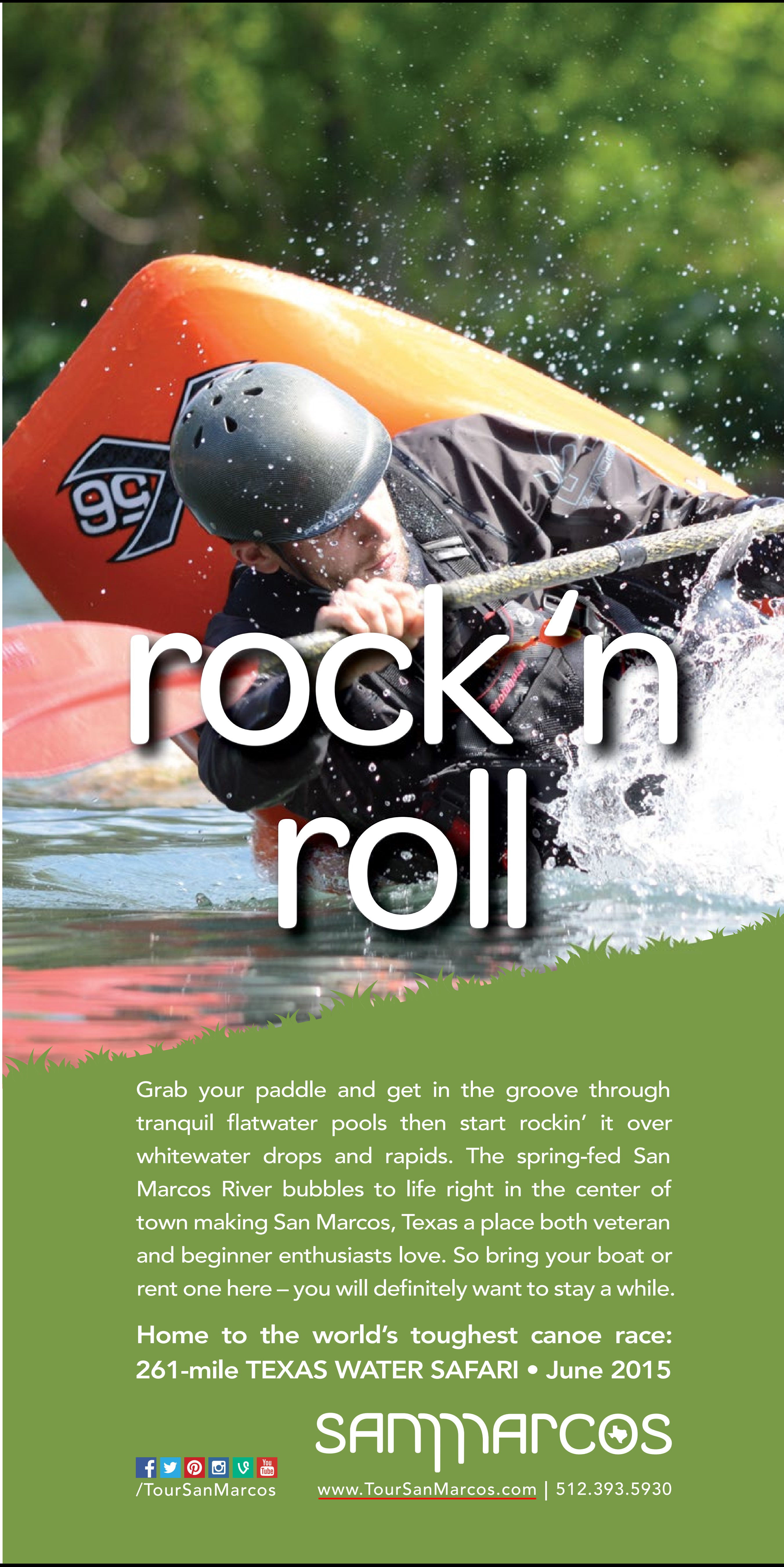


BROWN TOWN: Kenton Grua during a more relaxed run of Crystal Rapid in 1974. Photo from John Blaustein's 'The Hidden Canyon'

damaging their 50-hp motor in Bedrock Rapid, they happened across none other than river guide Kenton Grua, who'd set the speed record in *The Emerald Mile* 10 years earlier. Grua helped repair the motor and the crew went on to beat the dory's time by 55 minutes.

YEAR: 2015
PADDLERS: Ben Orkin and Harrison Rea
CRAFT: Epic 18X sea kayaks
TIME: 37 hours and 48 minutes

As night fell on January 6, Ben Orkin and Harrison Rea launched a pair of 18-foot Kevlar-reinforced sea kayaks with bow-mounted ATV headlights. After the first night, they were on track for a 36-hour descent—until a morning run through the incarnation of the same hole in Crystal that flipped *The Emerald Mile*. Rea cartwheeled several times and cracked his hull. "We probably lost an hour and a half total to repairs," says Orkin, who was shaken but unbroken. Despite baseline winter flows and minimal daylight, Orkin survived a terrifying run of Lava Falls that night to finish slightly ahead of Rea and claim the canyon's fastest kayak time.



Grab your paddle and get in the groove through tranquil flatwater pools then start rockin' it over whitewater drops and rapids. The spring-fed San Marcos River bubbles to life right in the center of town making San Marcos, Texas a place both veteran and beginner enthusiasts love. So bring your boat or rent one here – you will definitely want to stay a while.

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MIGHTY MO: Nearly 230 racers start the 2014 Missouri American Water MR340, paddling's longest nonstop ultramarathon. Photo: Cindy Hiles

COMMUNITY COLLAGE

JOIN THE TRIBE AND SAVE THE DATE FOR THIS SUMMER'S BEST SOCIAL PADDLING EVENTS

BY CONOR MIHELL

OUTDOORS, INC., CANOE AND KAYAK RACE

June 20 / Memphis, Tenn. / outdoorsinc.com

Memphis-based retailer Outdoors Inc.'s annual three-mile race on the Mississippi River attracts the likes of Olympic gold medalist Greg Barton and surfski phenom Oscar Chalupsky. But with dozens of boat categories and age classes, you need not be a speed freak to brush elbows with the stars in the race's infamous mass start.

PADDLE GEORGIA

June 20-26 / Rocky Ford, Ga. / gariver.org

The 294-mile Ogeechee River is one of the longest free-flowing waterways in the United States. Celebrate this unlikely fact with a seven-day paddling tour of hidden Georgia, tracing 95 miles of bottomlands, braided channels and tidal marsh. The event raises funds for the nonprofit Georgia River Network and Ogeechee Riverkeeper.

WCHA ANNUAL ASSEMBLY

July 14-19 / Paul Smiths, N.Y. / wcha.org

There's plenty of eye-candy to ogle at this annual gathering in upstate New York, as well as practical skills instruction—everything from solo canoeing workshops to paddle-carving and tips to help you restore your own wooden canoe. The 2015 event focuses on historic Maine-based builder B.N. Morris, which constructed ravishing wood-canvas canoes around the turn of the 20th century.

MISSOURI AMERICAN WATER MR340

July 28-31 / Kansas City, Kan. / rivermiles.com

Ready for an overnight adventure? This 340-mile race on the Missouri River crosses the entire Show Me State, ending in St. Charles, Mo. The dam- and portage-free course is divided into nine checkpoints, and paddlers must complete the race in 88 hours or less—barely half the entrants make the cut. As the race website proclaims, "It will be the hardest thing you've ever done."

FLOATZILLA

Aug. 15 / Rock Island, Ill. / floatzilla.org

After a morning of easy paddling on the Quad Cities Water Trail on the Mississippi River, participants will attempt to set a new Guinness of World Record for the largest raft of canoes and kayaks. Cracking the record book won't be easy: More than double last year's 959 participants will need to raft up for an aerial photo to beat the current record of 2,099, set in Michigan in 2013.

PADDLE OREGON

Aug. 17-21 / Corvallis, Ore. / paddleoregon.org

This five-day, 98-mile paddle on Oregon's Willamette River goes beyond the usual guided canoe trip. Think gourmet meals, local beer and wine, and entertainment—all in support of Riverkeeper's efforts to preserve the Willamette. See first-hand the biodiversity and vibrant river communities that made the Willamette a National Water Trail.

– SEE MORE AT CANOEKAYAK.COM/EVENTS

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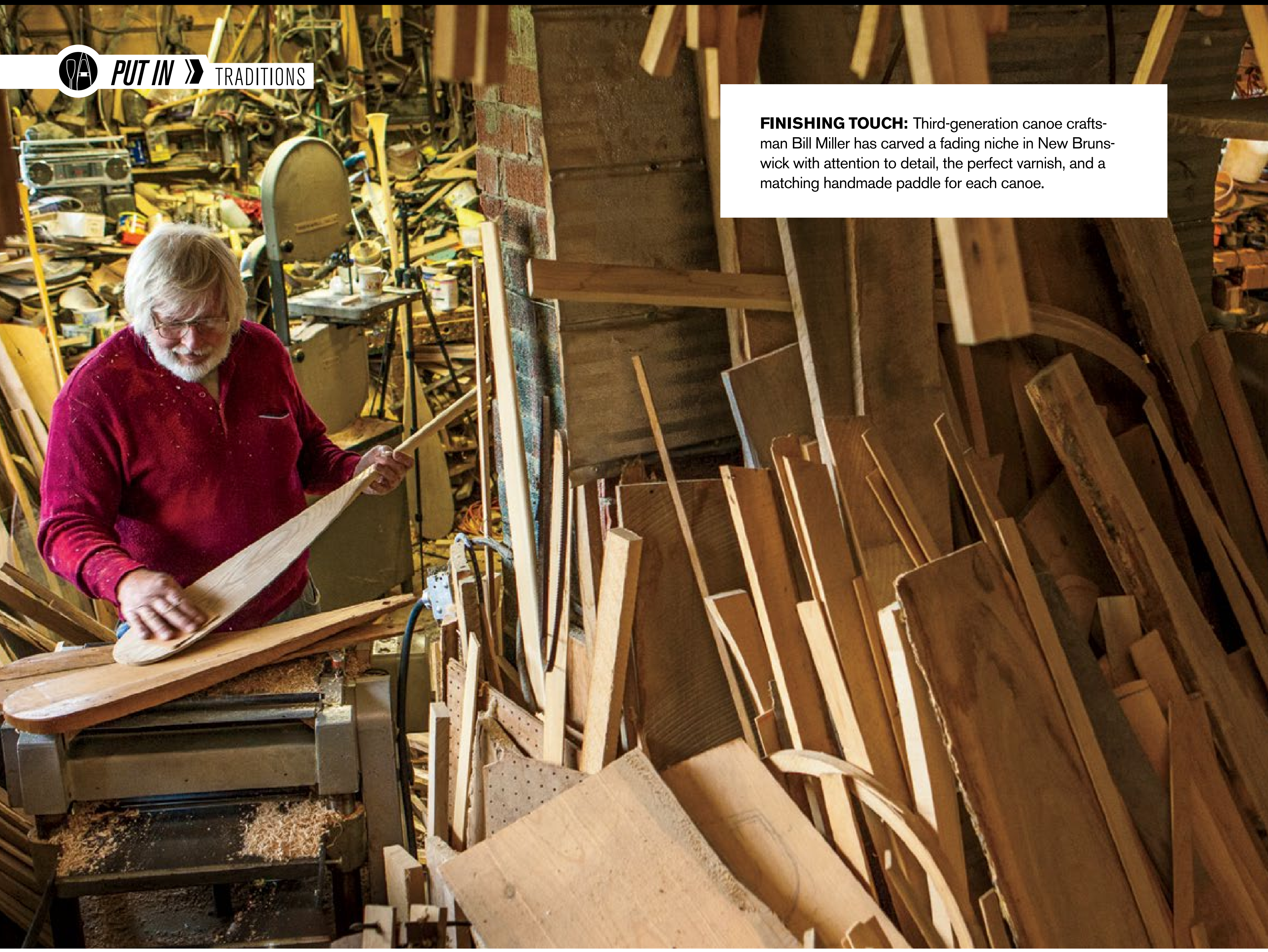

FINISHING TOUCH: Third-generation canoe craftsman Bill Miller has carved a fading niche in New Brunswick with attention to detail, the perfect varnish, and a matching handmade paddle for each canoe.

DEATH OF A RIVER

PHOTOS AND STORY BY DAVID JACKSON

When salmon filled every pool and moose lined each bank, the Tobique River near Nictau, New Brunswick, was a feast for sport. Meandering the Appalachian foothills, guides earned their keep by poling canoes up and down the river, which flows south into the Bay of Fundy. Sportsmen arrived by horse and wagon from the downriver village of Plaster Rock, greeted there at the epicenter of hunting and fishing in North America, The Miller Hotel. Guides needed canoes with a relatively flat bottom to navigate the shallow waters and steady current; those sportsmen needed a steady canoe to cast their flies. William 'Vic' Miller knew the river, understood the land, and he built a canoe to help him better connect with both. In 1925, Miller Canoes was born.

Today, what remains of Nictau is a much distant reality from the once thriving community. The town is at the confluence of three rivers and only eight residents remain. The salmon are all but gone with the introduction of a barrier in 1987. The wild woods have been clear-cut, leaving scars on the land and mud in the river. Tourists rarely travel up the Tobique to Nictau, and if they do, it's for one of two reasons: to see Mount Carleton Park, or to visit William 'Bill' Miller.

Like a brass tack in cedar planks, Miller Canoes remains. Bill is the third generation in a line of master craftsmen, his tools handmade by his grandfather. The current 18-foot Chickadee design is from the same mold as in 1925 and the shop is the same as his grandfather left it. The cedar for the canoes is found on the property, and from de-barking to the first float, a Miller Canoe is handmade.

For most of the year, the Tobique valley is a quiet place. However, for one weekend in June, it surges back to life. Each year for the past 20, Bill has organized an event called Fiddles on the Tobique. It is a weekend where Bill opens his property to campers,

thousands of people arrive, and the Saturday morning holds a symphony of fiddle players floating down the Tobique River. Nearly 1,000 vessels, with fiddlers in Miller Canoes, float together. For that weekend each year, Bill remembers a time now forgotten.

At the age of 70, Bill feels this will be the final Fiddle Fest as the organization and execution is becoming too great a task for him to manage. With no children, the question becomes more haunting each day. Has the world seen its last Miller?

– Check out C&K's Digital Feature on Miller Canoes and this year's Fiddle Fest.

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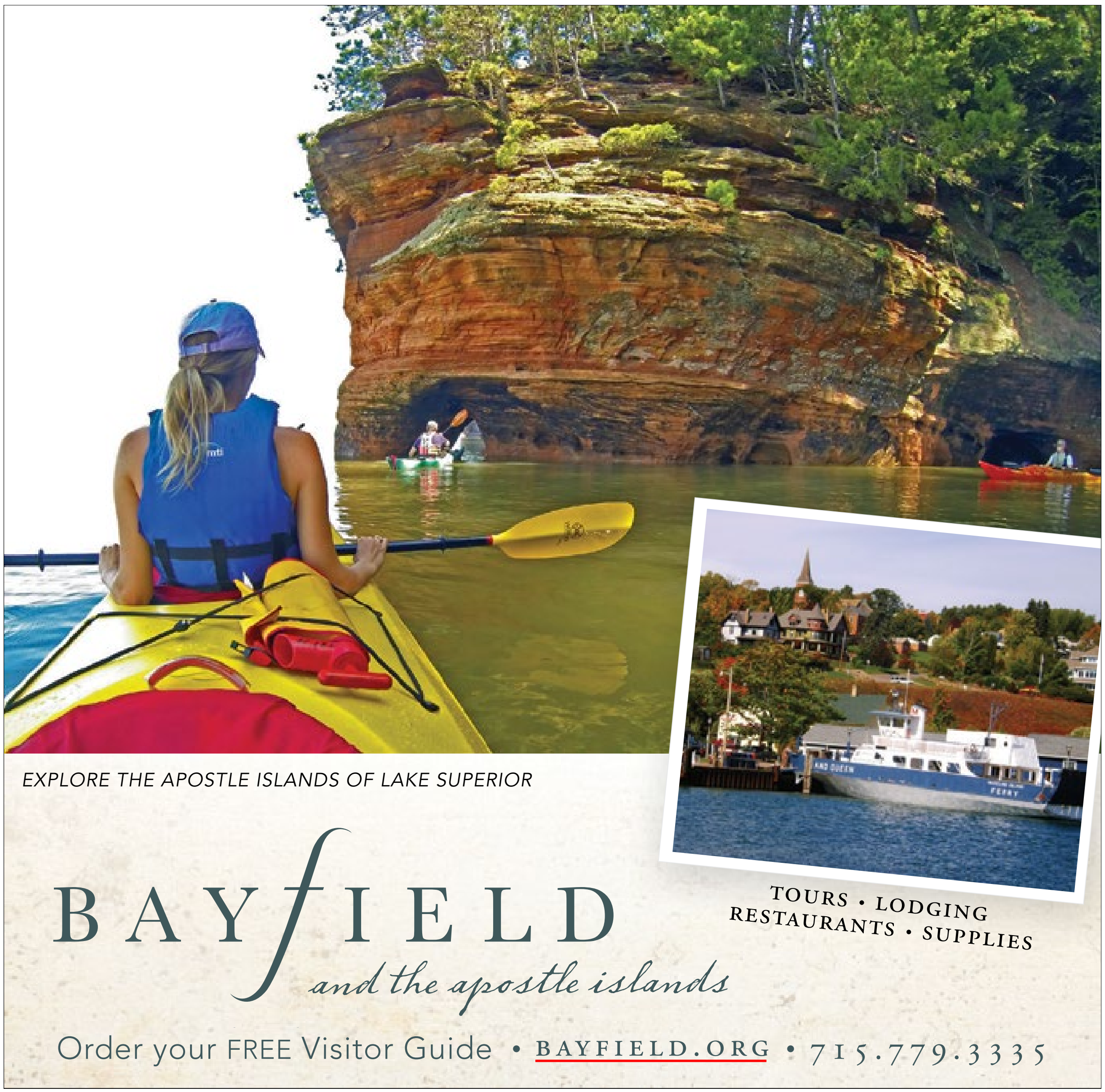

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Bridget Bennett / Minneapolis Star Tribune

WINTER ON THE BIG MUDDY

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIRST LEG OF THE REDISCOVER NORTH AMERICA EXPEDITION

BY CONOR MIHELL

Winchell Delano was shocked when his four-man, 2,600-mile canoe trip across Canada's far north won Expedition of the Year at the 2013 Canoe & Kayak Awards. With the recognition came a $2,500 grant from helmet manufacturer Shred Ready, and the expectation, says Delano, "that people want to see more."

So Delano recruited five friends—Adam Trigg, Luke Kimmes, John Keaveny, Dan Flynn and Jarrad Moore—and hashed out an audacious plan to "double down." The 5,200-mile Rediscover North America expedition bisects the continent from south to north, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Ocean. Completing the journey in a single season meant launching in January. "People all along the river have been telling us that we're going the wrong way," notes Delano, 30. "But the way the weather systems work, if you want to paddle from south to north across the continent, the itinerary sets itself."

For 29-year-old Trigg, the expedition mirrors wildlife migrations and captures the changing of the seasons. "We're seeing geese, ducks and swans flying north," says Trigg. "To be part of that migration and to be doing it under our own power is such a cool experience."

HIGHLIGHT "The other day, a guy in Wisconsin hailed us from shore," says Trigg. "He brought us in, gave us food, showers and a warm, dry place to sleep, and taught us how to make maple syrup. The next day, he sent us on our way with more food. That's the experience we've had with people all along the Mississippi."

LOWLIGHT "Not only do you fight the cold, wind and ice during the day, each morning we'd wake up covered in frost," says Delano. "When you pack all that stuff wet, you can be assured it will be nice and cold and icy when it comes time to make a new camp."

CRUX "Paddling upstream, our strategy is to stick to the slower water near shore," says Trigg. "But on the lower Mississippi, wing dams extend a quarter-mile into the river. We'd have to paddle out and around where the current is strongest—so strong we'd often have to pull the canoes over the dam. Another mile upriver we'd have to do this again."

ESSENTIAL SKILL "It's taken a lot of mental fortitude," says Delano. "I pick really small carrots of incentive during the day—things like moving onto dried apricots from prunes. Otherwise it's hard to get motivated for 10 hours of cold paddling."

ESSENTIAL GEAR "Our Hilleberg tents have been like sanctuaries," says Trigg. "They're our peace at the end of the day. Thoughts of 'Why did I ever say yes to this?' go away when you have a warm sleeping bag and tent to crawl into."

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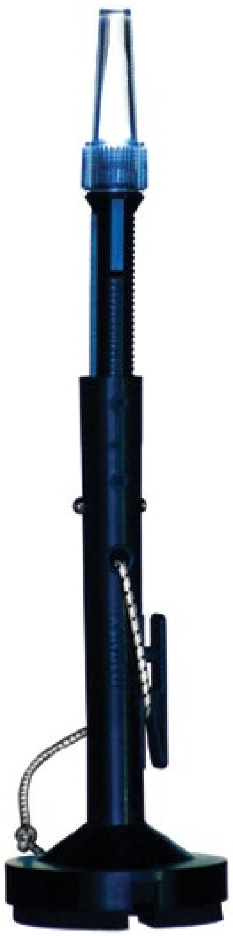

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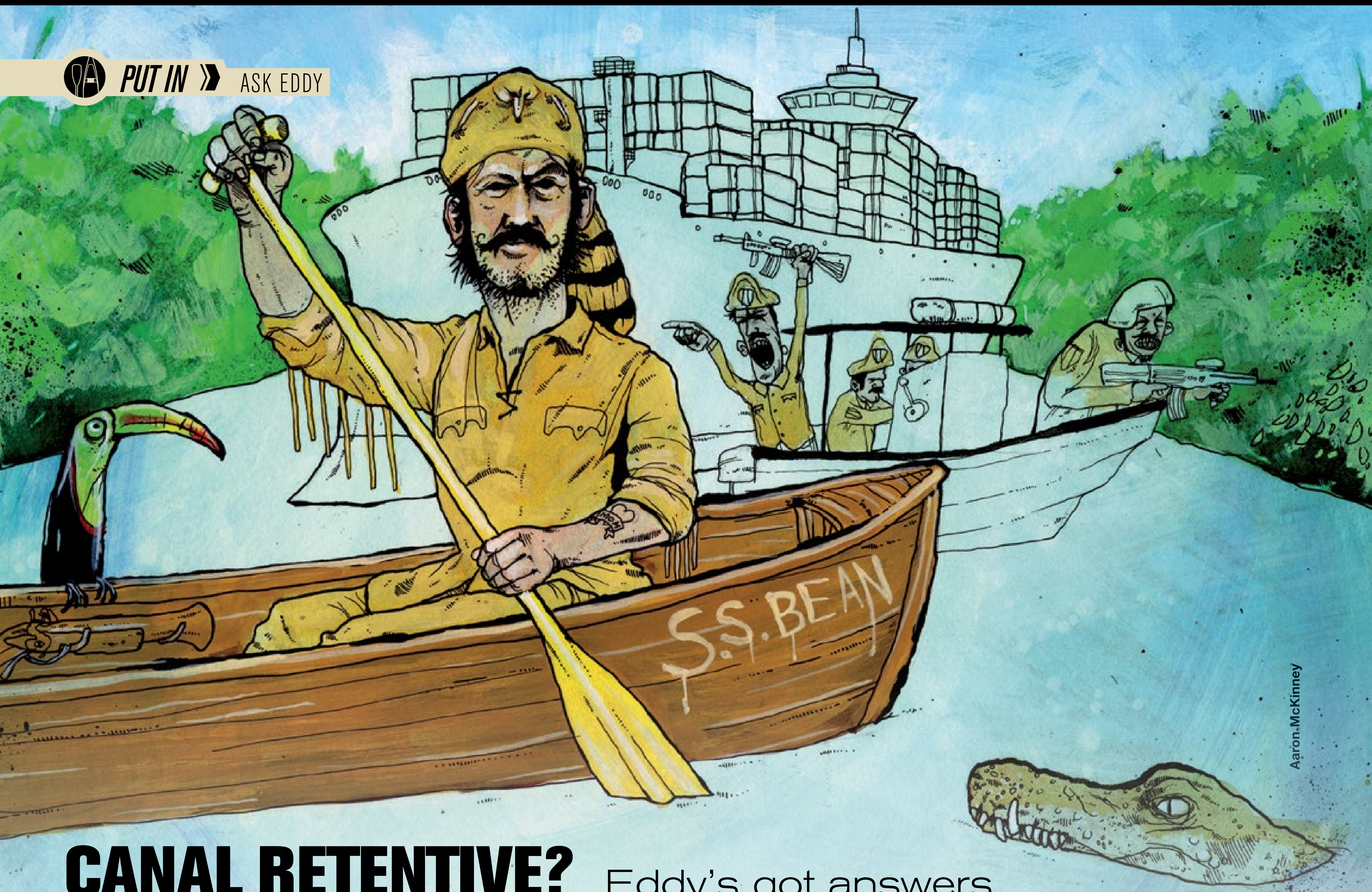

Aaron.McKinney

CANAL RETENTIVE? Eddy's got answers

CAN I PADDLE THROUGH THE PANAMA CANAL? Ducking through the 48-mile-long Panama Canal instead of paddling around South America will save you 7,872 miles, so it's a good idea. Sort of. Though Eddy has shunned Latin America ever since that awkward church mission Mother took us on for the travel discount alone, the canal shortcut still intrigues. The issue, however, is cost. Boats shorter than 50 feet get dinged with over $1,000 in fees (cheap compared to the 400 grand they charge container ships full of basketball sneakers). Even if you have the money, authorities might not let your little kayak into either of the two sets of 1,000-foot-long locks. That's according to Christopher Huerbsch, who helps organize the annual race through the canal in traditional four-person canoes called *cayucos*. Even with tradition on his side—the Ocean to Ocean Cayuco Race is in its 62nd year—Huerbsch can't always get access permission through the locks. "They are worried about liability," he says, and revenue (see above). Some years, the 60-plus canoe crews have to make the three-mile portage around the locks by car. In the 500-foot-wide Culebra Cut, on the Atlantic side, racers hug the shore to stay away from the line of mammoth ships. You'd likely get chased out of there by authorities in speedboats with bullhorns, says Huerbsch, which sounds like a job Eddy would dig. Once you are in the vast 164-square-mile Gatun Lake, you are pretty much good to go—there are more than a few kayak touring companies that ply the reservoir with tourists—until you hit the locks on the Pacific side.

WHY DO I PASS MORE GAS WHEN CAMPING? Every camper produces gas differently, and it's true that lots of them make more tail wind when in the backcountry. "Although I am far from a fart expert, I am a pretty good farter," says Buck Tilton, author of, ironically, *Don't Get Poisoned: Protect Yourself from Wilderness Toxins.* "I can tell you flatulence is gas produced by incomplete digestion, which is often caused by the sorts of foods we eat while camping." That means beans of course, and dried fruit, which both have sugars that are harder for the body to digest. Since campers eat a lot of raisins and such, they are bound to bake a lot of air biscuits. Some dried fruit brands have sulfites for preservatives, which can cause the rotten egg-type flatulence, so those biscuits might be pretty ripe. Poor hydration can also be a factor, says Tilton, as it clogs digestion, so be sure to waterlog those dehydrated meals. This is all fine by Eddy, who likes nothing more than a good blue angel session (never inside a flammable nylon tent, mind you), but according to Tilton, if your horn don't blow, that can be a serious problem, especially at altitude. Up there, some people get a lot more gassy because the lower atmospheric pressure lets carbon dioxide dissolve more easily from the bloodstream into the intestines. If you are a dehydrated mountaineer, you might not be able to pass that gas, and you'll get stomach pain. Not that Eddy would ever know—the highest he ever gets is the top of the town water tower, from whence he's been known to broadcast his trouser coughs with a bullhorn.

GOT A QUESTION FOR EDDY? Email it to AskEddy@canoekayak.com

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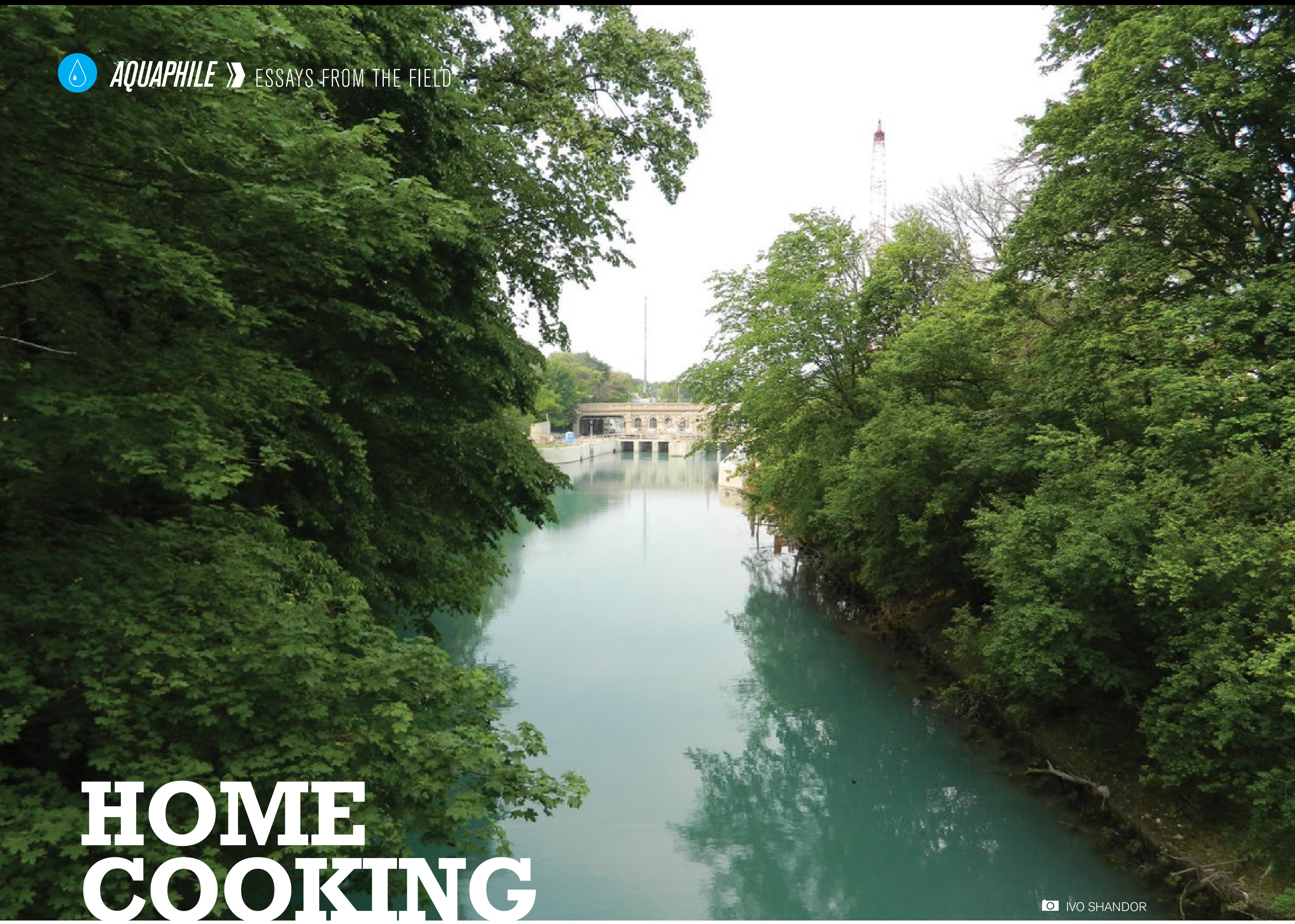

IVO SHANDOR

HOME COOKING

BY LARRY RICE

I grew up on the north side of Chicago, back when Mayor Richard J. Daley, the last of the big city bosses, still called the shots. Even then I longed to leave the urban jungle for the wilds of America. After all, where is a run-of-the-mill city kid going to find outdoor adventure in the midst of millions of tightly packed people?

One day I found my answer: in a canoe, on a perfectly straight, unloved canal two blocks from my childhood home. My little riparian getaway, an engineering marvel officially known as the "North Shore Channel," was built between 1907 and 1910 to flush the sewage-filled North Branch of the Chicago River down the Chicago and Sanitary Ship Canal rather than into Lake Michigan, the source of Chicago's drinking water.

Back then, around the time Tricky Dick Nixon was President, I would regularly cruise the canal in my beater aluminum canoe, six or eight miles without seeing another soul, except for the homeless men who would wave from their haunts under the ancient stone bridges spanning the canal. Some summer days, usually in the morning following a couple million toilet flushes, the stench emanating from the greenish-brown water would be more than I could bear. And sometimes, usually after a heavy rain with storm runoff, the filth and floating garbage would churn my stomach. To dip so much as a finger into this bubbling soup was unthinkable, but I didn't dwell on that. The canal was my private entrance to a lush greenway. Its high banks and slender veneer of woods provided a buffering effect, making me feel as if I were a million miles from the city. And on those days when I was feeling particularly adventurous, I would paddle my canoe north all the way up to the locks of Wilmette Harbor of Lake Michigan. Suddenly, I was an explorer and voyageur seeking out new horizons, though they were only a few miles from mom's home cooking.

I grew up and took a job on a state wildlife preserve 150 miles south, but whenever I visited my folks I'd try to squeeze in a short paddle on the canal. And on each successive outing, I would notice slightly cleaner water, more and more wildlife—whitetail deer, foxes, coyotes, beavers, raccoons, bats, turtles, and a wonderful array of birds—and sometimes other canoeists and kayakers who had also discovered this diamond-in-the-rough. My last paddle trip on the North Shore Channel was about three years ago, which coincided with the last time I saw my mother alive. I will not be going back. But I will always have plenty of good memories of canoeing that unloved canal two blocks from home.

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NORTH AMERICA'S BEST PADDLING TOWNS

A GREAT PADDLING TOWN IS MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS. IT STARTS WITH WATER, OF COURSE, BUT WHAT MAKES A PADDLING TOWN SPECIAL IS THE COMMUNITY THAT GROWS AROUND THOSE WATERWAYS.

Photo: Paul Bikis

BELLINGHAM, WASHINGTON

With world-class sea kayaking in Puget Sound, access to epic Pacific Northwest whitewater, and easy canoe camping at Baker Lake, Bellingham (pop. 82,000) is a paddler's delight, and also a hub for high level mountain biking and snow sports (nearby Mount Baker holds the world record for annual snowfall at 1,140 inches during the 1998–'99 season). An eclectic mix of fishermen and athletes, hippies and undergrads rounds out this colorful town. Bellingham also has more surfski paddlers per capita than any place this side of Durban, so if you want to go local, grab your 'ski when the breeze is fresh for a downwind run on Bellingham Bay.

– Aaron Schmidt

Photo: Jennifer Gulizia

HOOD RIVER, OREGON

On opposite banks of the mighty Columbia River, Hood River (pop. 7,400) and White Salmon, Wash. (pop. 2,300), are the Hollywood of whitewater boating—a river-laced wonderland where on any given day you could find yourself in an eddy with a pro boater. Creekboat-capped Subarus wrapped in sponsor logos sit like Easter eggs in Hood River's Safeway parking lot, their owners refueling between laps on the Northwest's benchmark creek, the Little White Salmon.

But don't be intimidated. It's not all gnarly hucksters in the Gorge. Beginner and intermediate boating abounds within a half-hour drive: Hood River, the Klickitat, and the White Salmon's Husum section all top out at Class III. The White Salmon's lower canyon is a walled-in stretch of consistent Class II-III whitewater unveiled in 2011 with the dramatic removal of the Condit Dam. A few hours farther afield are Wild and Scenic multi-day runs on the Deschutes, John Day and Grande Ronde.

Plus there's more here than whitewater. The Columbia Gorge's legendary winds attract all levels of kiteboarders and windsurfers, and paddlers as well. Surfski and standup paddlers put in at Viento State Park for downwinders, surfing up the big river on fat, rolling waves. When the wind settles—it does, honest—sea kayakers and standup paddleboarders knife across the gorge's morning glass.

Everything goes year-round, thanks to the generous glaciers of Mount Adams and Mount Hood. In fact, it's not a stretch to spend the morning skiing at Mount Hood's Meadows Resort (45 minutes away), catch an afternoon lap on the river, and then decompress with a sunset back at Hood River's new waterfront park, or a growler of craft grog from the nearby breweries.

— *David Hanson*

MEMPHIS

THE SOUTH'S BIGGEST PADDLING RACE

With America's great riverine artery pulsing through, Memphis (pop. 653,000) has always been a river town. The Mississippi carried influences from north and south, and stirred the pot that gave us such cultural delicacies as barbecue and the blues. The Big Muddy, with its intimate back channels and quiet tributaries like the Wolf River, also makes Memphis a first-rate paddling town. Each June, the city plays host to the South's biggest paddling event, the Outdoors Inc. Canoe and Kayak Race. The 34th running takes place June 20, with organizers expecting more than 500 people in everything from SUPs to war canoes. In the event's trademark mass start, Olympic gold medalists rub gunwales with first-time paddlers, and everybody has a good time. — *Katie McKy*

Photo: Joe Royer

WHITEHORSE, YUKON

Paddle culture runs deep in Whitehorse (pop. 23,000). In fact, this capital city got its name from the Whitehorse Rapids on the Yukon River, which posed a major obstacle to Klondike stampeders. Today everyone in this vibrant small town seems to own a canoe, and there's a whitewater park under development on the Yukon River downtown. Whitehorse's locale offers a host of paddling options like weekend trips down the Tatshenshini's upper canyon and is the jump-off point for many renowned fly-in expeditions into the Yukon's storied frontier. — *Jim Baird*

Photo: Courtesy Yukon Wild

Photo: Aaron Peterson

Photo: Regina Nicolardi

MARQUETTE, MICHIGAN

Sure, Marquette is small (pop. 21,500), but as the largest town on Superior's southern coast it has the culture and music of a larger city. It's a college town (think: jobs) with a large hospital (jobs). There's a great brew scene, diverse shoreline for kayaking, good inland lakes and rivers for canoeing, an hour from Pictured Rocks and Grand Island. Fourteen years ago I found Marquette on a map, got intrigued by the shoreline north of town (Google it and zoom in) and moved here sight unseen. I've never regretted it. *—Aaron Peterson*

ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

The timeworn hills behind Asheville's skyline hold some of the best paddling anywhere, but it is the steep-creeking university of the Green River Narrows that has transformed this city into the hub of Eastern whitewater. Year-round Class V dam releases, along with the city's embrace of the creative and active lifestyles, have drawn top paddlers and industry leaders to call Asheville (pop. 87,000) home. The region is now a leading exporter of all things whitewater, from locally made gear (see "Carolina Crafted," p. 66) to cutting-edge paddling films. Others are catching on to Asheville's vibe, including mountain biking innovators and some of the country's leading craft breweries. Now a proposed whitewater park is picking up serious support, with construction plans on the revitalized downtown section of the French Broad River, within a skipping stone of the nearly completed New Belgium Brewery. *— Joe Potoczak*

RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

The James River drops more than 100 feet as it passes through the glass and concrete valley of downtown Richmond (pop. 214,000), providing miles of tranquil flats and whitewater for all tastes, from gentle play-holes to Class V test-pieces. The James runs all year and at all levels, from languid summertime lows to maelstrom flows of more than 100,000 cfs. If that's too frothy for your taste, stroll the many access points of the James River Park System, or enjoy more than 20 miles of singletrack.
— Hunter Davis

HUNTSVILLE, ONTARIO

CANADA'S QUINTESSENTIAL CANOE PARK (AND A PADDLING GUT-CHCK)

The Meanest Link is a 175-mile homage to Algonquin Outfitters' hardnosed founder, Bill "Mean Dude" Swift. The canoe route connects the company's four Algonquin Park locations, including downtown Huntsville (pop. 19,000). Tackling this 93-portage suffer-fest is the surest way to gain instant credibility in Canada's canoe-tripping heartland. Current record: nine days.
— Conor Mihell

CHARLES CITY, IOWA

In Charles City (pop. 7,500), a handful of paddling visionaries and local planners transformed a deadly lowhead dam on the Cedar River into one of the best whitewater features in the country. A pair of similar parks in nearby Elkader and Manchester soon followed, making northern Iowa into an unlikely playboating hotbed. The Charles City park features a pedestrian bridge for viewing, and night surfing by city lights. There's good canoeing and sea paddling nearby as well—the Upper Mississippi is two hours away, while the Great Lakes and Boundary Waters are within a half-day's drive. *— KM*

Photo: Tim Mutrie

SALIDA, COLORADO

Longtime Salida, local Mike Harvey describes the town's annual FIBArk Festival as "X Games Meet County Fair." Mixed in with a funnel cake-filled carnival and the world's longest Shriners parade (suggestion: Lose the green hats), is an array of paddling events that draw the sport's best to this little mountain town. They range from slalom and freestyle competitions to the Hooligan Race and the marquee downriver race, 25.7 miles from Salida (pop. 5,400) to Cotopaxi.

This venerable marathon is responsible for FIBArk, and, for that matter, every river festival in America. On June 19, 1949, six boats—including rafts, folding kayaks and a craft made from an airplane belly-tank—entered the Arkansas River in Salida for a 57-mile, high-water race culminating in a fraught passage through the Royal Gorge. Billed as "an invitation to death" by media and racers alike, of the 23 paddlers who participated, only two Swiss kayakers reached the finish line. Organizers shortened the race to 45 miles the following year, in which one of 10 boats finished. In year three, they cut the course to 25.7 miles, still the longest whitewater race in the country.

"The race put Salida on the worldwide paddling map," says Harvey. "A lot of European racers came for it, and that international attention rubbed off on river runners in the Rockies as well." In 1953, Salida added the continent's first-ever whitewater slalom event, drawing more European racers. Two years later, organizers added the Hooligan Race for "anything that floats that's not a boat." Imagine a floating Mardi Gras on a collision course with a Class III hydraulic.

All this goes down in a town surrounded by great paddling, including the newly designated Browns Canyon National Monument, where Colorado's quintessential Class III run tumbles through the folds of an 8-mile granite chasm. Add an award-winning downtown whitewater park and the benignly destabilizing influence of river guides working for more than 26 commercial outfitters. It all starts with a festival whose roots ooze river running to the core. "It's a big part of Salida's culture," adds Harvey, "and a key event in a core paddling town." — *Eugene Buchanan*

Photo: Aaron Schmidt

ASHLAND, OREGON

Ashland (pop. 20,713) offers easy day-access to ample Class IV whitewater, myriad alpine lakes, and epic steelhead fishing—all of them just short of world-class. Local boaters prefer it that way. It keeps the Rogue River Valley from becoming a scene, but will keep a paddler happy for a lifetime. — *Joe Jackson*

Photo: Tom McCorkle

LAKE PLACID, NEW YORK

Adirondack Park is bigger than Yellowstone, Glacier, Great Smoky Mountains and Grand Canyon parks combined. Covering one-fifth of New York State, the park's 30,000 miles of paddling routes equal the length of a dozen Mississippi Rivers (or 9,600,000 rods, for you portage-minded canoeists). Lake Placid (pop. 2,500) lies right in the center of it. Best known for hosting the 1932 and 1980 Winter Olympics, Lake Placid makes a great summer base to explore the park, where canoes and wooden guideboats cut through quiet, tannin-stained waters, and loon song fills the air. — *KM*

Photo: Gregg Lambton

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

"The cool thing about Charleston (pop. 128,000) is it's so engrossed with water, not just physically but in the way people here see it and use it. There's an incredible mix: You've got the harbor, absolutely beautiful, choppy sometimes, but with good battery wall protection to keep the rough water out; you've got good beaches, intracoastal waterways, and great creeks. You can go watch the sun rise over one of the oldest cities in America and then paddle deep creeks and marshes to watch alligators and birds. But really, the best view of the city is from the battery, on the water. Don't pay $300 to see it on a sailboat; paddle out to see these beautiful old Civil War forts, pre-colonial homes, and an active fishing industry for yourself." *– Seth Cantley is an adaptive paddling instructor and adaptive athlete who launched a 130-mile SUP expedition on South Carolina's Broad River in 2012.*

FAYETTEVILLE, WEST VIRGINIA

Fayetteville (pop. 3,000) sits on the edge of the New River Gorge, and just down the road from the Gauley River. As such, it has become a mecca for raft guides and boaters drawn to two of the most fabled commercially outfitted rivers in the world. This is not to mention the countless other river reaches, or the walls of these same gorges that also make Fayetteville a rock climber's delight. Unwinding from a day on the river at one of the town's paddler-owned haunts, such as the Cathedral Café, it's no wonder why so many boaters come to Fayetteville for a season or two, and stay a lifetime. *– JP*

Photo: Kaare Iverson/Tandem Stock

Photo: Erich Schlegel

SAN MARCOS, TEXAS

The San Marcos River wanders in graceful twists and turns through the Hill Country and strolls through its namesake town before joining forces with the Guadalupe and heading seaward. What the river lacks in size it makes up for in aesthetics—its deep pools run cobalt blue, the shallows clear and swift.

Texas's only whitewater play-park is smack downtown in San Marcos (pop. 54,000) at the Rio Vista Dam, serving as a mecca for paddlers looking to hone their play-paddle skills year-round. Close by you'll find shade trees, Texas barbeque, icehouses, and legendary music venues like Gruene Hall. Just up the road lies Austin, with its world-class university, keep-it-weird aesthetic and great paddling of its own. For paddlers, though, the heart of Texas is San Marcos, thanks in no small measure to the Texas Water Safari, a 260-mile nonstop paddling race from San Marcos to the Gulf of Mexico. It's a test of physical and mental endurance, sure, but it's also a window into the Lone Star State's rich and unique paddling culture. *– Jeff Herman*

Photo: Gabor Degre/Bangor Daily News

OLD TOWN, MAINE

THE BIRTHPLACE OF AMERICAN CANOEING, REBORN

For thousands of years, the Penobscot people have lived in central Maine, traveling the waterways for much of that time in birch-bark canoes. Those versatile craft inspired the wood-and-canvas boats that A.E. Wickett began building in 1898, behind George Gray's hardware store in Old Town. Five years later, Wickett's and Gray's canoe enterprise became the Old Town Canoe Co., and paddling hasn't been the same since.

This part of Maine is, without doubt or hyperbole, the birthplace of modern paddling. Yet even as the canoes made in Old Town (pop. 7,800) carried settlers and sports into the wild country of Maine and beyond, the town's home river had long been tamed. More than half a century before Wickett bent his first stick of cedar, the first of many dams blocked the Penobscot's path to the sea. The obstructions decimated the historic Atlantic salmon and shortnose sturgeon fisheries, and drowned the rapids.

In 2012, the Great Works Dam in Old Town was removed. A year later, the Veazie Dam came down. Soon the rapids emerged from a bed of sediment. Then the fish began to come back.

In July, the Penobscot Nation will host the 2015 Whitewater Open Canoe National Championships on rapids that had been submerged for nearly 200 years.

"To be able to paddle down through the river the way my ancestors paddled it, I can't even describe it," says Scott Phillips, a member of the Penobscot tribe who started working at Old Town Canoe Co. in 1989. "It has a very good spot in my heart to be part of this project." — *Matt Sturdevant*

DULUTH, MINNESOTA

With a vibrant downtown boasting live music, grassroots businesses, craft breweries and stunning views of Lake Superior, Duluth (pop. 86,000) has become a fixture on lists of best places to live for the hip and trendy. In a city renowned for its abundant green space, "right out your backdoor" paddling is Duluth's best kept secret, says David Grandmaison, the owner of The Duluth Experience, a multisport outfitter. "Lake Superior's north shore begs for sea kayak expeditions and the St. Louis River estuary provides endless exploration." Just out of town, steep creeks peak with the spring freshet and whitewater on the dam-controlled upper St. Louis is runnable year-round. — *CM*

FRANKFORT, KENTUCKY

AMERICA'S BEST PADDLING FILM FESTIVAL

It takes a hell of a good party to get some of the brightest lights in whitewater—including Tyler Bradt, Doug Ammons, Steve Fisher and Rush Sturges—to host a film festival in the middle of winter. Since 1983, the world's best paddling films have been showcased at the National Paddling Film Festival in Frankfort (pop. 27,500). The two-day event in February is organized by the Bluegrass Whitewater Association; the venue, a bourbon distillery. Hundreds of paddlers and 70 volunteers come for a downriver race on Elkhorn Creek, and two nights of films, barrel-aged whiskey and beer. — *CM*

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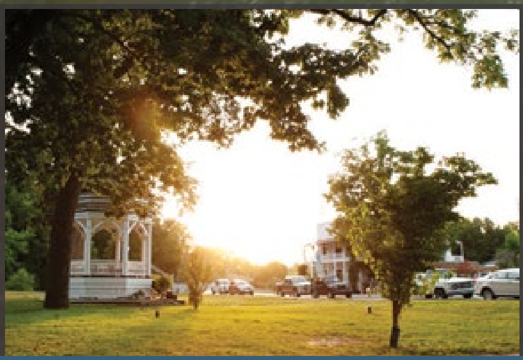

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OKLAHOMA CITY

How does a city in the middle of the Oklahoma prairie make a list of paddling's best towns? You have to visit Oklahoma City (pop. 610,000) to understand. The city is bursting with self-assurance—an "if we build it, they will come" spirit that pervades the community. *It*, in this case, is the restoration of the Oklahoma River, which the *New York Times* once called a "scar through the city's heart, at times a trickle of water in a ditch so overgrown it had to be mowed three times a year."

How times change. The revitalized river is now OKC's centerpiece, anchored by a pair of spaceship-inspired boathouses, where Olympic kayakers and rowers train, and where regular folks participate in all manner of paddlesports. The Boathouse District sits between the river and a lush new downtown canal system, accessible from downtown by foot, bike and water taxi.

And Brick Town is just getting started. By this time next year, a new $45 million, two-channel Whitewater Center will be open to the public. It was fully financed by a citizen-funded penny sales tax that underwrites "quality of life" initiatives throughout Oklahoma City. *— CK*

Photo: Living Adventure Inc.

BAYFIELD, WISCONSIN

There are plenty of reasons to like Bayfield (pop. 500), starting with the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, where ice and waves have sculpted the Great Lakes' most spectacular caves. They vary from slivers to vaulted rooms and some come in mauves, pinks, and taupes, adorned with plush moss. Come August, Lake Superior's water clarity competes with the Bahamas, where you'll feel as if you're flying as much as floating. All that, and Bayfield is in easy range of the lake's north shore whitewater and canoe-country gems. *— KM*

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

Almost a century ago, rum-running Garwood torpedo boats rooster-tailed between Detroit and Canada, gunning their custom-fitted truck engines to outrun Prohibition-era cops. Hiram Walker's Canadian Club, distilled across the river in Windsor, Ontario, was in high demand. Around the same time, genteel picnickers listened to outdoor concerts from canoes gathered in the quiet cove of Belle Isle.

Detroit (pop. 688,000, down from a mid-1950s peak of 1.8 million) has become shorthand for urban decline. The Motor City glitz is gone, but Detroit remains a city of vivid contrasts. An inspired urban agriculture movement grows vegetables in abandoned lots. A younger creative class is gravitating to a city that, despite economic ruin and a racially charged past, still holds vast potential. And amidst it all is lots of water. Narrow canals connect the mansions of industrial barons with blue-collar homes, the wide Detroit River carries freighters, and it all flows toward the ocean-like horizon of Lake Erie.

Paddling, like the city itself, has potential and pioneers. Every Wednesday for the last 11 years, a crew of local boaters (visitors welcome) led by guides from Riverside Kayak meet at Pine Street for a two-hour paddle on the Detroit River, restoring themselves afterward with drinks at Portofino. A Tuesday night crew explores Grosse Ile Island and the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge.

And those canoes are making a comeback on Belle Isle. Riverside Kayaks is opening a canoe, sea kayak and SUP livery and rental in the historic Flynn Building, adjacent to a calm lagoon. Alex Howbert, owner of Detroit River Sports, wants to create paddle-up access to Marshall's Bar, a historically infamous speakeasy with a basement door previously used by bootlegger boats. He's also organizing four-hour paddles down the River Rouge and another excursion out to Chene Park Amphitheater on the bank of the Detroit River, where floating boaters can poach concerts from the water, just like the old locals used to. *— DH*

Photo: Crisco 1492

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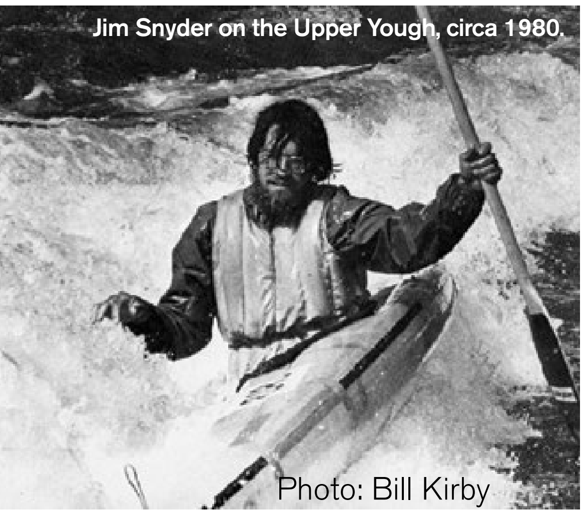
Photo: Irene Owsley

WASHINGTON, D.C.

It's our nation's capital and, possibly, the best paddling town in America. From scenic (monumental) flatwater to a burly Class V town run and everything in between, Washington, D.C., (pop. 659,000) is a paddler's paradise. Start at Great Falls of the Potomac, which offers adrenaline seekers a smorgasbord of waterfalls. Just downstream, Mather Gorge serves up a range of Class III options that go depending on levels. At the popular Old Anglers Inn put-in, you'll find kids trying out their first strokes, freestyle paddling guns heading up to Center Chute, or a crowd of longboaters attaining together for Cheat Race practice.

Between Mather Gorge and downtown D.C. lies one of the wildest urban corridors in America. Bald eagles soar over the river's numerous Class II drops, en route to the Class IV finale at Little Falls, one of the few tidal whitewater rapids in the country. From there it's moving flatwater to the Georgetown waterfront and down past the Lincoln Memorial. On sunny weekends the river is crowded with rowers, sea kayakers and SUPs. The nation's 4th of July fireworks show attracts a massive crowd of all types of watercraft. The Potomac continues its long journey to the Chesapeake Bay with hundreds of miles of explore-able shoreline, including Mallows Bay, a ship graveyard filled with a ghost fleet of more than 230 vessels. — *Skip Brown*



Jim Snyder on the Upper Yough, circa 1980.

Photo: Bill Kirby

FRIENDSVILLE, MARYLAND

Friendsville wasn't always so friendly. In the late 1970s, paddlers raced to get around the first bend in the Upper Youghiogheny before armed locals arrived to dissuade them. Only after Roger Zbel and Phil Coleman brokered a river access deal did tensions ease. Then, as companies like Zbel's Precision Rafting and Demaree Inflatable Boats brought jobs into town, Friendsville began to warm up to outsiders. Twila Fike greeted boaters at her Old Mill Restaurant, and a local bar owner put up the prize money for the first Upper Yough Race in 1981. Local paddling legend Jess Whittemore was even elected to the Town Council, which worked to expand the dam release schedule. Today, hundreds of boaters descend on Friendsville to paddle one of Appalachia's best whitewater streams, and linger in the town's cafes and pubs.

— Chris Preperato's short film, 'Shootout at Sang Run' chronicles the early days on the Upper Yough.

ROANOKE, VIRGINIA

The Roanoke River meanders through the center of Roanoke (pop. 97,000), flanked by a greenway that's perfect for walking, biking, or human-powered river shuttles. This central Virginia town also boasts Carvins Cove, the nation's second largest municipal park at 12,700 acres, with an 800-acre lake at its center. Whitewater boaters have plenty of options in the nearby Blue Ridge. There's a paddling playfulness in Roanoke, which manifests itself in events like the Pigg River Ramble, hosted by the Creek Freaks paddling club. Bonus: The Appalachian Trail runs just north of Roanoke. — *KM*

FLORIDA KEYS

The Gulf meets the Everglades at the start of the Florida Keys Overseas Paddling Trail in Key Largo. While paddling past the fossilized coral reefs that comprise the Keys, you'll see critters like rays, manatees, sea turtles, and dolphins. On Big Pine Key, visit the Blue Hole and keep a lookout for Key deer, a diminutive (and endangered) subspecies of whitetail. The trail ends in Key West, where the wildlife is typically either inebriated or descended from a six-toed cat given to the town's most famous resident, writer Ernest Hemingway. — *KM*

EMINENCE, MISSOURI

There's a canoe engraved on the Missour-*ah* state quarter. No surprise, then, that canoe outfitters outnumber restaurants in this quaint outpost town, gateway to the Jacks Fork and Current rivers. Fed year-round by blue-water springs, both feature rocky bluffs, lush forests, limestone caves, bald eagles, and ample fisheries. Nearby, you'll find the Wild and Scenic Eleven Point River. To the north, the St. Francois Mountains (out-of-staters would call them hills) offer seasonal Class II-III runs and the Missouri Whitewater Championships. All good reasons why what some call fly-over country is better described as paddle-through.
— *Mike Bezemek*

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WRITTEN BY M. JOHN FAYHEE
PHOTOS BY JONATHON GRUENKE AND HANNAH BROWN

There Be Dragons: Fayhee, with his traveling companion Casey, return to the setting of a memorable adventure. Virginia's Dragon Run.

I

LAKE CHAMPLAIN

"It has been proposed that low doses of heavy water can slow the aging process by helping the body resist oxidative damage." — Mikhail S. Shchepinov, from 2007's *Reactive Oxygen Species, Isotope Effect, Essential Nutrients, and Enhanced Longevity, Rejuvenation Research*

Plattsburgh Air Force Base, upon which I spent most of my first 12 years, consisted of 3,447 acres of what can best be described as "primo real estate" in upstate New York. To the west lay the Adirondack Mountains. To the south flowed the Saranac River. To the north: Quebec. And to the east: 490 square miles of Lake Champlain.

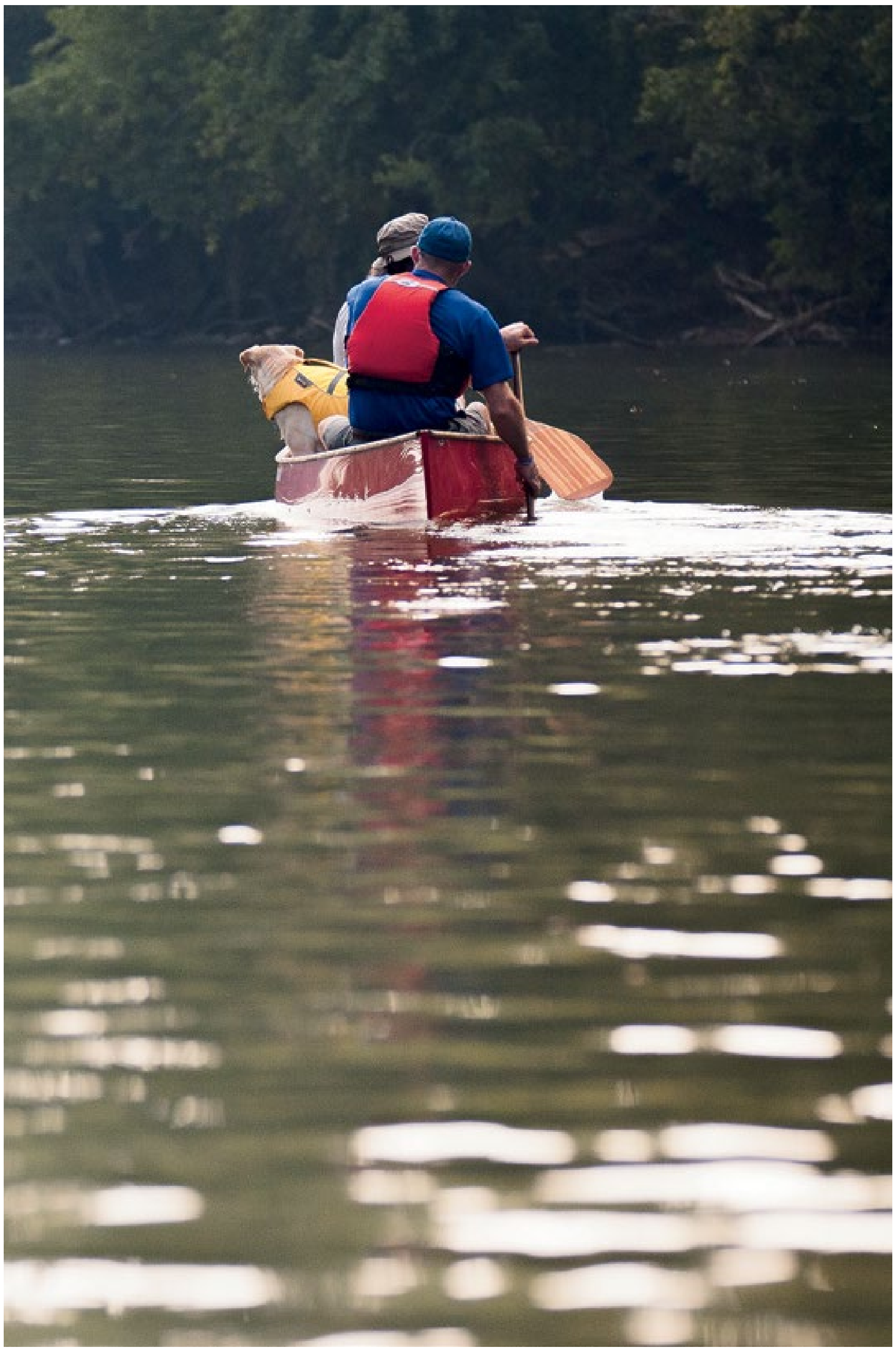
The base, which was decommissioned and turned into a well-coiffed housing development in 1995, did not take full aesthetic advantage of its stunning location. Spawned by Cold War expediency, its design was drab, utilitarian and singularly uninspiring. It was constructed for a single unambiguous purpose: to house the big bombers—B-47s and B-52s—in perpetual preparation for DEFCON-1.

Its only noteworthy amenity was a broad beach on the shore of Lake Champlain that was open only to Air Force personnel and their dependents.

Rare was the summer day when the base progeny did not congregate en masse on that beach, which, from an administrative perspective, would not have passed muster in these tort-filled days. Though there was a floating rope located a fair ways out into the lake that delineated what was in bounds and out of bounds, there was never a lifeguard present to enforce the boundary. Matter of fact, I cannot recollect ever having seen an adult on that beach. Kids were sent unattended to frolic in the frigid waters, with the parental assumption being, I guess, that they would either return home at the end of the day or not. We swam out past the rope on a regular basis, at least as much, I suspect in retrospect, to thumb our noses at the omnipresent specter of Air Force authority as to stretch our fledging wings.

There is no better way to spend a childhood than immersed in water big enough that it is scary.

I had not laid eyes on Lake Champlain since the Summer of Love. Last fall, I pulled my Toyota 4Runner into Cumberland Bay State Park on the kind of bluebird day one does not usually associate with the North Woods Country. I had left New Mexico several weeks prior with the twilight-of-life plan to revisit the waterways of my youth before it becomes Too Late. And stage one of that unabashed trip down memory lane involved paddling three miles across Lake Champlain to a place called Valcour Island, which, when you have lived for almost 40 years in a part of the country where the



knee-deep Gila River is considered a major waterway, seems like a mighty long way out there.

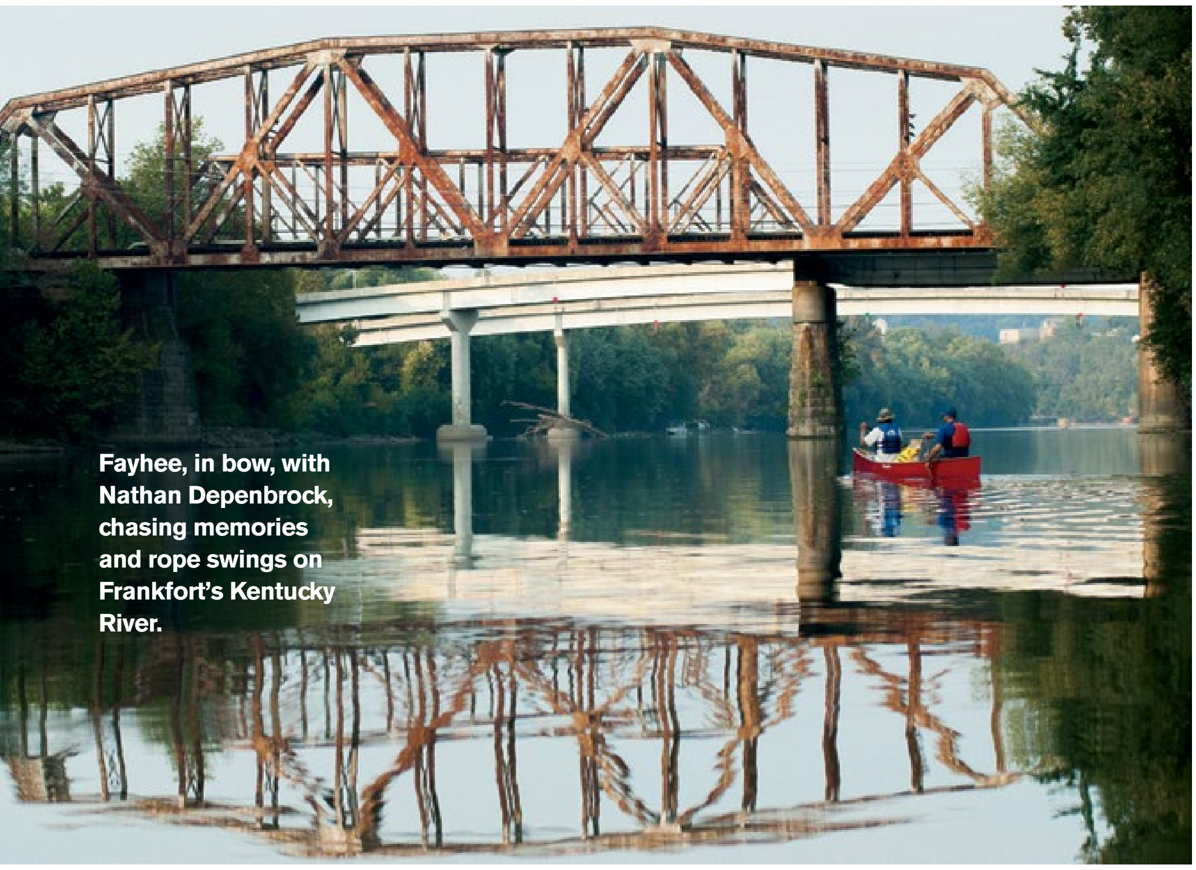
As I squint my ancient orbs toward our destination, I am standing high and dry at Peru Landing, alongside my dog Casey, two touring kayaks and Dave Husband, who, with his wife, Patty, owns the Kayak Shack just south of Plattsburgh.

Given his vocation, Dave is conversant in the ways of millibars and wind shift. Prior to our departure, he had scrutinized the weather report, which called for continued clear skies and calm water. But, he stressed, the meteorological shit can hit the climatological fan sans warning and turn the now-placid surface into an instant maelstrom. "When the wind suddenly comes up from the south, I've seen waves jump up five feet tall," Dave said matter-of-factly. Somewhere back in the deep recesses of my genetic encodation, vivid recollections of such circumstances percolated forth. And they made me wince.

His name was Paul Edwin Kendrick. He was captain in the U.S. Air Force. He came into my life when I was 5, shortly after my mother and father, who was also in the Air Force, parted ways. Though I do not know this for certain, I suspect young Capt. Kendrick had something to do with the divorce of my parents.

It was July 1965, and I was 9 years old. As usual, I was at the beach when the mother of one of my cohorts came running down the hill with orders for me to return home without delay. Even before I arrived via Schwinn, I could feel the chill of the dark cloud that had descended upon our residence. About 13 different kinds of intense hell were simultaneously breaking loose, and at the epicenter of the storm was my mother, a native of the United Kingdom who had lived in the States for less than a decade, losing her goddamned mind. Through a degree of intense blubbering that I had not even imagined possible, much less witnessed in person, I could discern that Capt. Kendrick had scant hours before drowned in Lake Champlain, just off Valcour Island, in the general area where I am now paddling an Advanced Elements touring kayak on a lovely fall day with Dave Husband.

The details of Capt. Kendrick's demise remain murky, either because of the vagaries of the time-memory coefficient or because they were deliberately withheld from my young self. But the bleak narrative went something like this: There was a group of Air Force personnel and their spouses out on a boat. As usual, there was much in the way of alcohol consumption. The weather suddenly turned and the waves grew monstrous. Somehow, Capt. Paul Edwin Kendrick, who was 32 years old—unbelievably, 26 years younger than I am now—sank beneath the waters. Family legend has it that my mom, who was a



Fayhee, in bow, with Nathan Depenbrock, chasing memories and rope swings on Frankfort's Kentucky River.

> **IT BECAME A JOURNEY OF LIBERATION, ONE THAT SHOWED FOUR DIPSH*T BUMPKINS FROM THE SWAMPY MIDDLE OF NOWHERE THAT THEY COULD PULL A CHALLENGING TRIP OUT OF THEIR ASSES.**

competent swimmer, tried in vain to save him.

It took Dave and me a relaxed hour to reach Valcour Island. We parked our kayaks at the head of an inlet and began traipsing around the interior, which is laced with a series of well-marked footpaths. The very words "Valcour Island" have for most of my life conjured up images of despair. They were dark words, akin to "Mordor" to Hobbit ears. Yet, this place to which I just paddled is full of beauty and light. It is a state park often visited by people seeking the restorative power of nature. There are sailboats bobbing in the picturesque bay. There are semi-primitive campsites, accessed only by boat, spread tastefully hither and yon. There are colorful kayaks and canoes pulled up on the beach. There is life in glorious, bird-tweeting abundance.

I barely remember Capt. Paul Edwin Kendrick. He was an extremely good-natured man who wanted to be a college professor. He loved to golf. He loved to fly with his uniformed compadres up into the wild blue yonder. And, if memory serves (and I truly hope it does), he seemed to love me, even though our time together was short-lived. Either way, I do know that he recognized me for who I was: a wild child. He did not interfere with my proclivity to run amok through the North Woods, to ski in the Adirondacks, to swim unsupervised in the very waters that eventually took his life. He is buried at Arlington National Cemetery in a grave I have never even thought to visit.

II

THE KENTUCKY RIVER

"*On the highway of life, we most often recognize happiness out of the rearview mirror.*" — Humorist Frank Tyger

After Capt. Kendrick's untimely death, we were unceremoniously kicked off Plattsburgh Air Force Base, which was socially disorienting in the extreme, for it made us feel like outcasts. A few years later, my mom met yet another member of the U.S. Air Force—a dashing fighter pilot from a part of the country where they talked more slowly, a man whose lips turned blue whenever the temperature dipped below 60, which it often did in the North Woods.

Before long, the car that Capt. Kendrick purchased new and drove proudly, a navy-blue Pontiac Grand Prix, was loaded to the gills and we were pointed to a faraway destination called Frankfort, Kentucky.

It is no small understatement to say that I considered Frankfort—where the fighter pilot, who by now had become stepfather number-two, took a job as a staff attorney for the Kentucky state government—to be a major step down. Having spent my entire short life dwelling in a region dominated by mountainous public land, I now found myself dwelling in a place lacking so much as a sizeable city park. And while I was lamenting the lack of territory upon which I could wander unfettered, I was near-bouts paralyzed by many other sobering Southern realities. The heat and humidity knocked me on my ass. I became acquainted with ticks and poison ivy. The pejorative "Yankee" passed my ears for the first time.

My only salvation took the form of a ribbon of water that flowed through the middle of Frankfort: the Kentucky River, a languid 259-mile tributary of the Ohio River that has gained a modicum of national recognition via the works of famed writer Wendell Berry, who has long lived downriver in Henry County.

I spent considerable time swimming in the river, but it was not until I started hanging out with a classmate named Lloyd Arnold that I became truly intimate with the Bluegrass State's namesake waterway. Lloyd's family owned a tobacco farm, next to which the Kentucky River flowed. More importantly, Lloyd had a boat. It was not much of a boat, mind you, but it was enough. Probably 10 feet long, it consisted of two metal pontoons held together by a piece of plywood. It was powered by a 5-horsepower motor of indeterminate lineage. Lloyd and I spent many summer weekends motoring at about point-two miles per hour up and down the Kentucky like two-stroke versions of Huck Finn, our travels limited only by the locks that thwarted our headway in both directions.

Nathan Depenbrock, who, along with his wife Allison owns and operates Canoe Kentucky, the state's largest outfitter, chuckles when I relate my memories on the river upon which we are now preparing to paddle.

CONT. ON PAGE 72

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BACK TO THE BOUNDARY WATERS: Gary Sundberg and his son Craig enjoy a still morning on Crooked Lake.

ALL MY SONS

A CANOE COUNTRY REUNION

WORDS BY CONOR MIHELL | **PHOTOS BY MARTIN SUNDBERG**

“MY DAD SHOPPED FOR TRIP FOOD AND CAME BACK WITH THE SAME TERRIBLE HUNK OF SALAMI HE ALWAYS BOUGHT.”

– MARTIN SUNDBERG

TOUGH LOVE: Craig Sundberg in classic form–paddle out of the water–just as when he was kid. He always had trouble talking and paddling at the same time, his brothers say.

Leather backpack straps tear into shoulders on a long carry; chewy, thick-sliced salami for lunch; jokes and banter echo over calm water; pine trees whisper in the breeze; the scrub of granite on bare feet; the tug of a hefty northern pike: These are the collective summertime memories of Gary Sundberg and his sons, Martin, Aaron and Craig. The timeless sensations of canoe-tripping may fade over time, but as the Sundbergs discovered last July, young families, high-paced jobs and thousands of miles of separation cannot displace deep-set traditions rooted in Minnesota’s North Woods.

For five days last July, the Sundbergs relived memories they hadn’t experienced in more than 20 years, as father and sons returned to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) for a paddle and portage trip. Being back in the wilderness together triggered intense flashbacks. The men slipped into the roles they’d defined for themselves as boys. Aaron, a 40-year-old engineer and avid triathlete, surfer and cyclist from Oahu, became his pre-teen self, casting for walleye for hours. Reassuming his big-brother status, Martin, a 42-year-old professional photographer from San Francisco, took charge in pitching camp. Craig, a 38-year-old father of two from suburban Minneapolis, was engrossed by the simple details of organization—from hoisting the kitchen pack beyond the reach of black bears to studying the route on a map.

“A lot of it was routine,” says Martin. “We all contributed and did our usual things—just like we’ve always done as brothers on canoe trips, the same as when we were 12-year-olds. My dad went out and shopped for trip food and came back with the same terrible hunk of salami he always bought back then. He still packed like a Boy Scout.”

There was nothing special about the route they followed, a BWCA classic tracing the Basswood and Horse rivers and connecting a handful of lakes north of Ely, Minn. Their travel days were mostly easy, the midsummer weather benign. They even took a rest day to take advantage of good fishing at one of the Basswood’s many waterfalls. The remarkable thing about this canoe-country reunion is that it happened at all.

“It wasn’t necessarily an epic adventure,” says Martin, “but it was epic in that three career people with families of their own came together and pulled it off. In that sense, it really was a trip of a lifetime.”

Over the 2013 Christmas holidays, Gary Sundberg had an unsettling revelation. He was nearing 70, and his boys had long since grown up and moved away, living their own busy lives with families and careers in Minnesota, California, and Hawaii. One evening, when the dinner table discussion turned to canoeing, Gary turned wistful. "We had some wonderful trips," he reflected, "but I don't think we'll ever get up to the Boundary Waters as a family again."

Moved by Gary's remark, Craig's wife, Amy, was the first to suggest a father and sons canoe trip to celebrate Gary's 70th birthday. The brothers started tossing around plans by email, with Craig leading the organization in Minnesota. They thought about making it a surprise—just showing up on Gary's birthday with the canoes loaded and saying, "Dad, get your paddle." After some debate, they scrapped that plan in favor of announcing the idea to their dad on Father's Day. He was thrilled and jumped into the preparations.

"Half the fun of a canoe trip is figuring out a route, putting the gear together, making the menu and doing the shopping," says Aaron. "We selected the week in July that bracketed dad's birthday. I put it on my calendar. There was no way anything was going to interfere with the trip."

Canoeing is etched in the Sundberg DNA. Gary and his brother started paddling as boys in South Dakota, inspired by a few Scout outings and canoe races on the James and Missouri rivers. He was barely a teenager when he built his first canoe—a fiberglass boat with crude wooden gunwales. ("It was a real disaster but at least it floated," Gary laughs.) He fell in love with canoe camping in the North Woods on Boy Scout trips, including a paddling adventure along the Boundary Waters' famous Border Route in 1959.

"It's like my dad was on a quest to be a paddler," says Martin. "He did this completely unguided, without any influence from his own parents."

College and a stint in the Navy during the Vietnam War interrupted Gary's paddling for about a decade, but after returning home and marrying, he built his first cedar-strip canoe. He became an avid woodworker, eventually crafting a solo and tandem canoe, sea kayaks for each of his sons and their spouses, and, most recently, a pair of standup paddleboards. Martin's earliest memories are saturated with the heady aroma of cedar and spar varnish and the glow of fluorescent lights in his father's workshop, going back to when he was small enough to walk underneath the strongback building form of a wooden canoe.

Of course, woodworking was only half of the equation. The family put the canoes to use, venturing north to the Boundary Waters and exploring this vast network of interconnected waterways—sometimes with mother Linda, or with Gary's brother and his son. "My brothers and I have been around boats as long as I can remember," says Martin. "We paddled on the weekends, fished, and made six or eight trips to the Boundary Waters. All of this impacted who we are today. Beyond photography, paddling is my greatest passion."

"The routes were remote and the fact that we were able to pull this off almost every single year was pretty amazing," adds Aaron. "As boys, it gave us an appreciation of outdoors. Our folks did a really good job of getting us involved in silent sports and we've all hung onto that. Going outdoors and seeking adventure is a big part of all of our lives."

Portaging into Basswood Lake.

Two canoes drift on the Basswood River, just downstream from the tumbling, multi-channelled cascades that make this waterway along the U.S.-Canada border one of the most scenic parts of the BWCA. The Sundbergs paddled lackadaisically, soaking in the sunny weather and spectacular surroundings. Gary approached this trip as he always had, hoisting two packs and a canoe at the start of each carry. "We had to take them off of him, at every portage," Martin laughs.

On the water, the boys diligently navigated through the labyrinthine lakes and rivers of northern Minnesota. This was a joy for Gary—a role-reversal that made him proud of his sons. Not paying complete attention to their position on the map, he was stunned when a granite cliff loomed ahead where the Basswood entered Crooked Lake. The monolith was instantly familiar. "Let's go check it out," he told his sons.

With more urgency now, the canoes veered toward the rock wall, which was bathed in warm sunlight. As they got closer, blood-red Ojibwa rock paintings took shape. For Gary, the whimsical and obscure renditions of animals, people and spirit-forms dating back centuries elicited an instant recall. "I'd been there before," he says. "I knew we were in the same general area I had paddled as a kid, but all of a sudden, I saw this and realized we were on the exact same route I had done as a Boy Scout 55 years ago. That was an awakening."

Meanwhile, Aaron revelled in canoeing's slower pace, fishing, swimming and relaxing in camp. Deep in the BWCA, he was profoundly aware that he was disconnected from the constant distractions of computers and smartphones. He became engrossed in a timeless and satisfying rhythm. "It takes more and more effort to slow down in my day-to-day life," says Aaron. "That was the most rewarding part for me.

"Martin took a photo of my dad and Craig in a canoe, paddling in the mist next to an island with two pine trees," he continues. "It's an iconic photograph that captures the whole trip for me. It was nice to focus on my dad and my brothers and the relationship I have with them."

Though Craig lives within a four-hour drive of the wilderness, he admits last summer was his first multiday canoe trip in a long time. "But after 20 years, the place hasn't changed at all," he notes. Paddling and camping with his father and brothers made Craig realize just how powerful the experience could be for his daughters, now aged 4 and 6. "In a few years, I know my wife and I will be taking them on canoe trips as well," he says.

As a photographer, Martin's responsibilities revolved around documenting the trip. While all the Sundberg boys hope to make future canoe trips with their father, for now Martin's photographs serve as concrete reminders that this trip actually happened—that the campsites, portages and misty lakes weren't just a dream.

The photo that topped Martin's shot list was a portrait of Gary, back in his element. The elder Sundberg looks vibrant, youthful and content in the company of his sons. "When you do a canoe trip," says Gary, "you realize that your kids are your best friends."

BIRTHDAY BOY: Gary Sundberg celebrating his 70th.

"WHEN YOU DO A CANOE TRIP, YOU REALIZE THAT YOUR KIDS ARE YOUR BEST FRIENDS."

– GARY SUNDBERG

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ACCESSORY GUIDE

AARON SCHMIDT

CANOE&KAYAK

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01 YAKCLIPS

PRICE: $9.95

Clip on paddle clip. Two second installation, No holes to drill, no tools needed. Adjustable/removable. Two accessory clips built in for holding fishing poles, dry bags, etc.

02 YAKUZZI

PRICE: $16.95

Clip-on drink holder for kayaks and canoes. Two second installation. No holes to drill, no tools needed. Adjustable/removable.Keep your drink secure and nearby. Holds up to 20oz bottle. Net bag also attaches to the clip to hold snacks or stuff. Available in Black, Orange and Light Blue.

03 YAKCATCHER

PRICE: $29.95

Clip-on fishing rod holder for kayaks and canoes. Quick installation. Adjustable/removable. No tools needed, no holes to drill.

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SUP: New for SUP's

04 YAKGRIPS

PRICE: $14.95

Comfort Paddle Grips. The ultimate in comfort for paddling. Prevents rubs and blisters. More efficient paddling and better hand placement.

YAKPADS
the journey matters...

05 YAKPADS

PRICE: FROM $19.95

Gel-Filled seats and accessories for kayaks and Canoes. Soft Lycra™ laminated to neoprene seating surface. Non-skid backing on seat bottom. Gel-filled inner core with permanent memory. Benefits: Reduced pressure point on kayaker's seat. Insulates paddler from cold seat. Gel-filling distributes pressure evenly. Added comfort improves kayaking experience and increases endurance.

NRS

NRS.COM | 800.635.5202 | MOSCOW, ID

01 HYDROLOCK DRY BAG

MATERIAL: 70-DENIER URETHANE-COATED NYLON ▎ **PRICE:** $24.95 - $42.95

HydroLock™ seal zips shut like a freezer bag for total waterproof security. The additional StormStrip™ closure also doubles as a carry handle. Tough clear urethane window makes finding your gear a breeze. Smooth exterior slides easily in and out of boat hatches.

02 SUP LEASH WITH QUICK-RELEASE BELT

MATERIAL: CORDURA® BAG ▎ **PRICE:** $49.95

Here's a leash that's safe to use in whitewater and surf. The quick-release waist belt safely disengages you from the board during a bad swim. When there's no risk of entrapment, remove the leash from the Cordura® bag and attach it as a calf strap. The in-line swivel prevents tangling.

03 PILOT KNIFE

MATERIAL: 420 HC STAINLESS STEEL ▎ **PRICE:** $44.95

Recreational boaters and rescue professionals alike love the NRS Pilot Knife. Its unique locking sheath keeps the knife secure until you need it, then quickly releases with one hand. The knife features smooth and serrated edges, plus a rope cutting hook, bottle opener, blunt safety tip and glass-breaking awl.

04 CO-PILOT KNIFE

MATERIAL: 420 HC STAINLESS STEEL ▎ **PRICE:** $44.95

The Co-Pilot is the little brother of NRS's popular Pilot Knife. Its compact quick-release design stays securely out of your way until you need it. When duty calls, it performs like a full-size blade. Features smooth and serrated cutting edges, a blunt safety tip, bottle opener and comfortable rubberized grip.

05 WEDGE THROW

MATERIAL: CORDURA® BAG ▎ **PRICE:** $49.95

There's always room in the boat for the NRS Wedge Throw Bag. Its compact, flattened shape makes it easy to wedge into kayak cockpits, and even into some PFD designs. 55' of 1/4" polypropylene line gives plenty of reach, and mesh panels quickly drain the tough Cordura® bag.

NRS

NRS.COM | 800.635.5202 | MOSCOW, ID

06 YAK YAK BOAT CART

MATERIAL: ANODIZED ALUMINUM FRAME ▌ **PRICE:** $99.95

The easy, no-hassle way to get your boat to the water. Airless wheels excel on any surface, element-resistant materials ensure longevity, and NRS Loop Straps with Buckle Bumpers safely secure your boat. It's 30% lighter than other carts, and the breakdown design fits in most kayak hatches.

07 TWO-PIECE KAYAK PADDLE BAG

MATERIAL: CORDURA® OUTER SHELL ▌ **PRICE:** $89.95

Protect that prized paddle when traveling to your next touring adventure. Fleece-lined Cordura® construction guards against dents and scratches. Two mesh inner pockets and one clear outer pocket hold accessories like your paddle leash, car keys, plane tickets, etc. Center carry handle and shoulder sling make carrying easy.

08 MAPCESSORY CASE

MATERIAL: URETHANE
PRICE: $13.95 - $29.95

No more soggy charts or flapping maps. The Mapcessory Case easily lashes to your boat or deck bag for on-the-go navigation and stowing small items. Tough clear urethane material is built to withstand weather and abuse, and the HydroLock™ zip-seal closure ensures contents stay completely dry.

09 SUPER STRETCH COCKPIT COVER

MATERIAL: 1.5-MM SMOOTH-SKIN NEOPRENE ▌ **PRICE:** $49.95

Super stretchy neoprene and an adjustable shock cord make it a snap to install on any kayak. Smooth-skin 1.5-mm neoprene sheds water and resists abrasion for long-lasting proection. Two sizes fit just about any cockpit: Universal for 28"-40" cockpits and the Universal Plus for 40"-57" cockpits.

10 TAJ M'HAUL DECK BAG

MATERIAL: 400-DENIER NYLON
PRICE: $99.95

Large compartment zips with one hand and holds its shape to shed spray. A HydroLock™ urethane insert keeps contents completely dry. Mesh outer pockets and bungee lacing hold your bilge pump, sponge, paddle float and small essentials. Hook-and-loop straps plus corner clips ensure easy rigging. Reflective tape for high visibility.

WHEELEEZ

WHEELEEZ.COM | 800.369.1390 | BENICIA, CA

01 KAYAK CART - BEACH

PRICE: $241

The Kayak Cart-Beach, equipped with unique low pressure balloon wheels will move your sit-on-top or fishing kayak with ease over the most difficult surfaces; even soft sand or soggy ground. Heavy duty, collapsible aluminum frame is marine grade anodized, after fabrication. Optional Rail Kit for greater stability with deep keeled boats.

02 KAYAK CART - MINI

PRICE: $135

The Kayak Cart-Mini equipped with unique low pressure balloon wheels will move your touing kayak with ease over the most difficult surfaces; even soft sand or soggy ground. Compact, collapsible aluminum frame is marine grade anodized, after fabrication.

03 RAIL KIT

PRICE: $29

The Rail Kit is an optional accessory for the WheelEEZ Kayak Cart-Beach and Kayak/Canoe Cart with Tuff-Tires. It provides extra clearance and increased stability for boats with deep keels.

04 KAYAK/CANOE CART

PRICE: $135

The Kayak/Canoe Cart wtih Tuff-Tire Wheels is equipped with foam “Tuff-Tire” wheels. They will never go flat and are maintenance free. Heavy duty, collapsible aluminum frame is marine grade anodized, after fabrication. Optional Rail Kit for greater stability with deep keeled boats.

05 KAYAK CART - MINI WITH TUFF-TIRES

PRICE: $89

The Kayak Cart-Mini is equipped with indestructible Tuff-Tires that will never go flat. Compact, collapsible aluminum frame is marine grade anodized, after fabrication. Easily stows in day hatches of most touring kayaks.

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01 CRUISER

MATERIAL: RIP STOP NYLON ▮ **PRICE:** $174.95

The biggest, most powerful sail in our line-up. Great for loaded boats, tandems or large fishing kayaks. Stows in a small 20” coil, yet expands into a large 56” sail. This sail has been onboard many award-winning expeditions and is ready to pull you along on yours!

WindPaddle Sails
perception

02 ADVENTURE

MATERIAL: RIP STOP NYLON ▮ **PRICE:** $149.95

New this year with 25% more sail area, a flatter profile for better across the wind sailing and a stiffer perimeter batten for excellent stability in big winds. Get more speed in your boat with lighter breeze. This is the sail for experienced paddle-sailors as well as a stable learning sail.

03 SCOUT

MATERIAL: RIP STOP NYLON
PRICE: $114.95

Our entry-level sail is getting a face-lift this year with a bigger window, a stiffer batten and a lower price that will let you and your wallet paddle-sail with an even bigger smile on your face. Designed with stability that novice to advanced paddle-sailors will love.

04 SUN SHADE - XL

MATERIAL: RIP STOP NYLON
P**PRICE:** $119.95

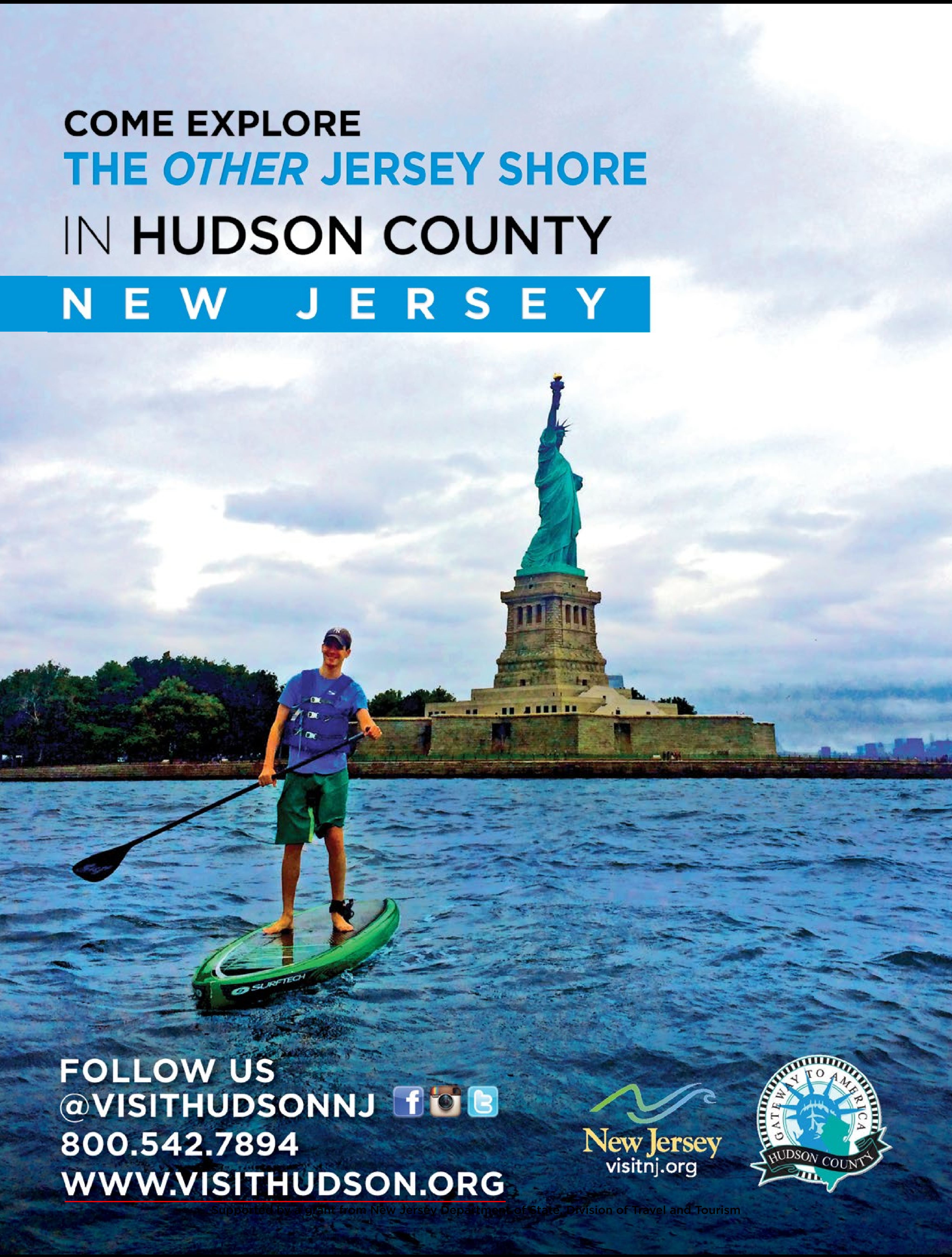
WindPaddle’s Sun Shade (XL) gives you control over how much sun you want to get. Attaches to any kayak, SOT or canoe in minutes without drilling, screwing or gluing. Release the front line and the shade lays down behind you, out of the way until needed again! Colors: Blue or CoastGold

WindPaddle Sails

05 SUN SHADE - S

MATERIAL: RIP STOP NYLON
PRICE: FROM $89.95

For smaller shade requirements (your pet, your cooler, your bait well or even for you) the Sun Shade “small” offers protection yet is less bulky than the “XL” (think paddling creeks with branches, etc.) Great for mid-day sun angles when you are getting cooked directly from above.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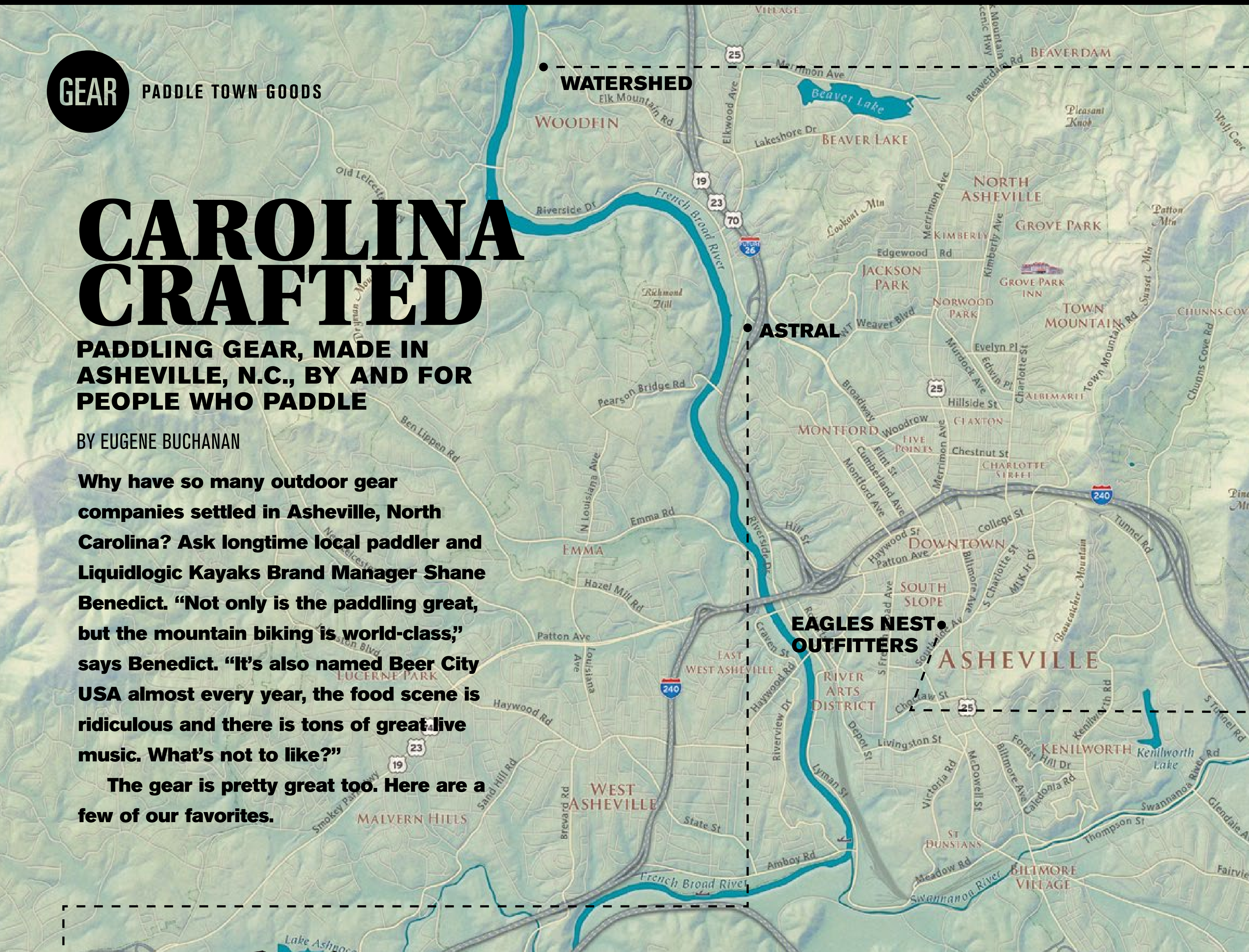
CAROLINA CRAFTED

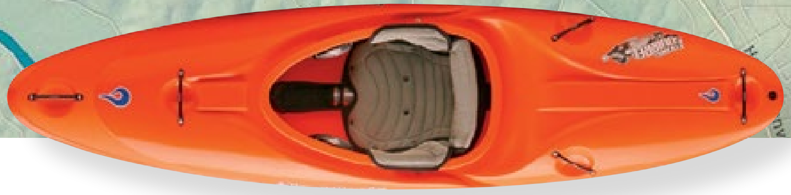
PADDLING GEAR, MADE IN ASHEVILLE, N.C., BY AND FOR PEOPLE WHO PADDLE

BY EUGENE BUCHANAN

Why have so many outdoor gear companies settled in Asheville, North Carolina? Ask longtime local paddler and Liquidlogic Kayaks Brand Manager Shane Benedict. "Not only is the paddling great, but the mountain biking is world-class," says Benedict. "It's also named Beer City USA almost every year, the food scene is ridiculous and there is tons of great live music. What's not to like?"

The gear is pretty great too. Here are a few of our favorites.

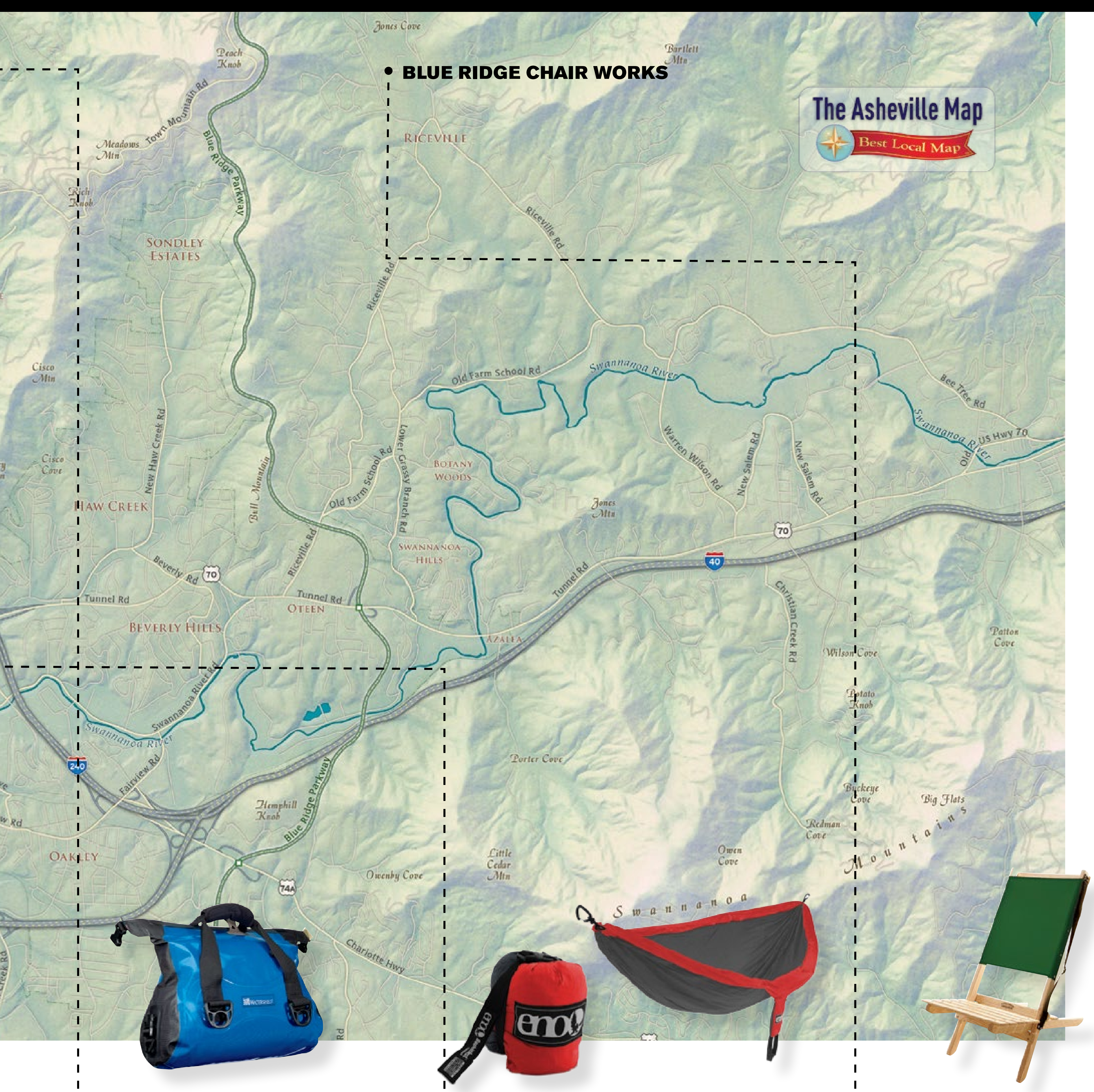




Astral Designs: "Asheville has year-round whitewater and beautiful, pristine trails," says Astral founder Phil Curry, whose 25 employees make life vests and river shoes in a converted tobacco barn on the French Broad River. "And it's an open-minded, creative community." The creativity shows in the **Greenjacket** rescue PFD ($249, astraldesigns.com) featuring Astral's trademark foam tectonics construction, reinforced shoulders, integrated chest harness, and a big clamshell pocket we can't stop raving about. Add fleece hand warmers, and this vest is the ultimate package to keep you safe and comfy on the river. Get there in comfort and style with the **Rassler** ($119), a classic hike-to-huck river shoe with enhanced foot support, draining uppers, and its new sticky G Rubber soles.

Liquidlogic/Native Watercraft: Liquidlogic started in 2000 as a dream on the banks of the nearby Green River Narrows. Together with sister brand Native Watercraft, the company now offers a full range of kayaks for everything from fishing to whitewater. This year Liquidlogic debuts the **Flying Squirrel** ($900 plus shipping, liquidlogickayaks.com), a new creekboat model named for the signature move in the entrance to the Green's best-known rapid, Gorilla. The design builds off the speedy hull profile of the company's popular **Remix** creeker, with extra bow rocker and deck volume. For paddlers who fish, Native's **Redfish 12 Angler** ($740, nativewatercraft.com) combines stability and easy handling with a fish-ready deck layout. Sixty-five employees, most of them paddlers, fuel Native and Liquidlogic's new production facility just south of Asheville.

TO FLETCHER, N.C., 10 MILES


BLUE RIDGE CHAIR WORKS
The Asheville Map
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Jones Cove
Peach Knob
Bartlett Mtn
Town Mountain Rd
Meadows Mtn
Blue Ridge Parkway
Riceville
Rich Knob
Riceville Rd
Sondley Estates
Cisco Mtn
Old Farm School Rd
Swannanoa River
Bee Tree Rd
Cisco Cove
New Haw Creek Rd
Lower Grassy Branch Rd
Botany Woods
Warren Wilson Rd
New Salem Rd
US Hwy 70
Old US Hwy 70
Haw Creek
Bull Mountain
Jones Mtn
Swannanoa Hills
Beverly Rd
70
40
Tunnel Rd
Oteen
Beverly Hills
Azalea
Christian Creek Rd
Wilson Cove
Patton Cove
Swannanoa River Rd
Potato Knob
240
Fairview Rd
Porter Cove
Hemphill Knob
Buckeye Cove
Big Flats
Redman Cove
Oakley
Owenby Cove
74A
Little Cedar Mtn
Owen Cove
Swannanoa Mountains
Charlotte Hwy

Watershed: Founded in the 1980s by river guides bent on building a better drybag, Watershed's patented ZipDry closure and polyurethane-coated fabrics have become the gold standard for video boaters and anyone else who needs a quick-entry drybag that won't leak, period. The 900-cubic-inch **Ocoee** ($120, drybags.com) is a photographer's favorite, while the 8,400-cubic-inch **Mississippi** ($200) will keep a river wardrobe fresh, no matter how big and muddy your trip. Whatever river name goes on your duffel, rest assured it is made in Watershed's production facility on the banks of the French Broad.

Eagles Nest Outfitters: Brothers Peter and Paul Pinholster started ENO out of their minivan in 1999, crafting ultra-light hammocks out of old parachutes and selling them at music festivals. What a long, strange trip it's been since. Led by their best-selling, two-person **DoubleNest Hammock** ($70, eaglesnestoutfittersinc.com), which packs down to the size of a grapefruit and deploys in seconds, ENO now employs 28 people in the heart of Asheville's South Slope district. "The community is relaxed, outdoor-loving and incredibly inspirational," says ENO's Natalie DeRatt. Plus, the factory is within a Frisbee toss of no less than six microbreweries.

Blue Ridge Chair Works: After guiding rafts for years on the Cheat, Youghiogheny and Gauley rivers, Alan Davis eventually settled down in Asheville to make handcrafted canoe paddles and furniture. His two-piece **Blue Ridge Chair** ($113, blueridgechair.com) is a model of sustainability, comfort and Appalachian craftsmanship. It's also true to the raft-guide aesthetic—it folds flat, dries fast, and comes with a bottle opener.

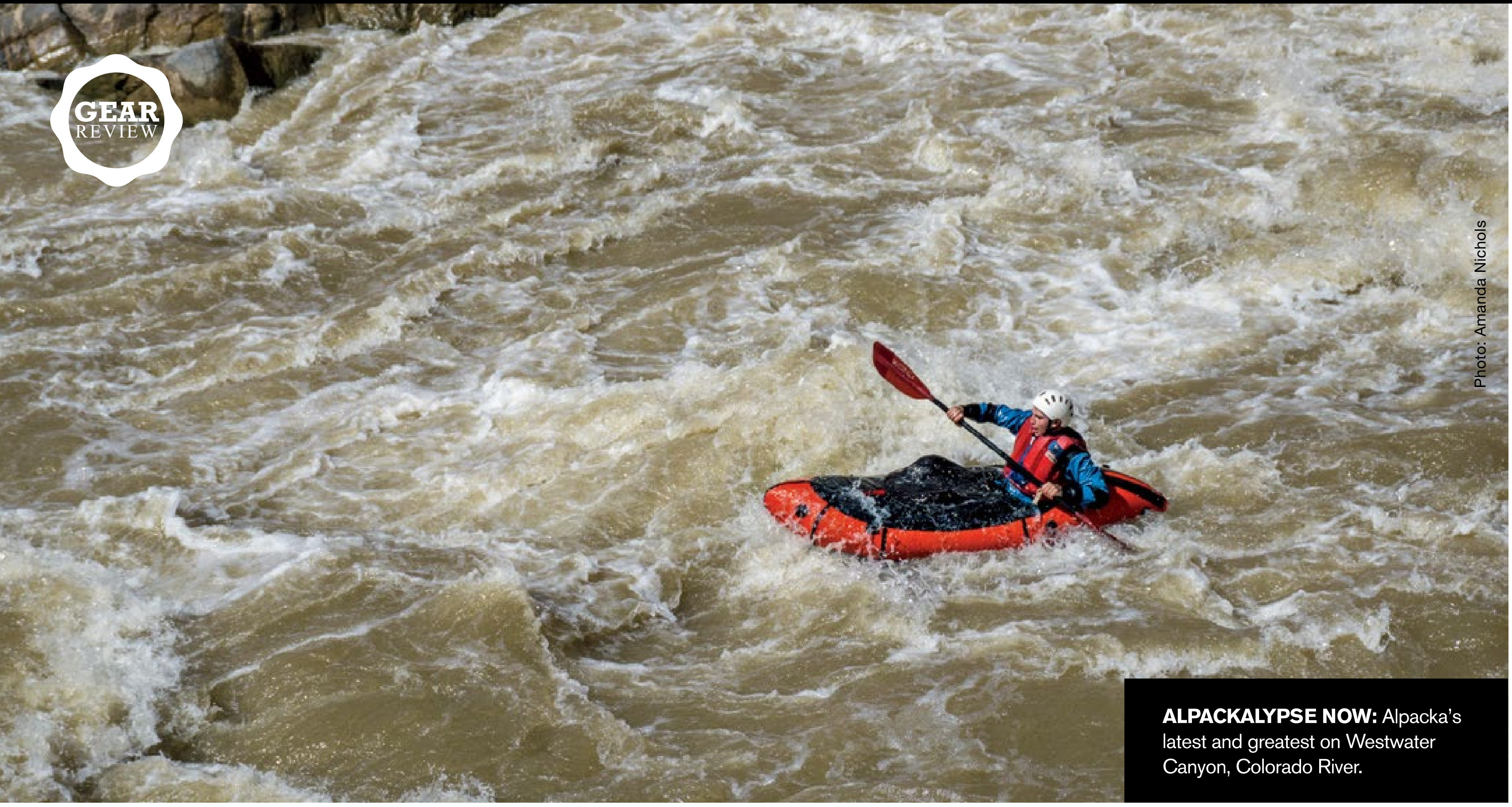

Photo: Amanda Nichols

ALPACKALYPSE NOW: Alpacka's latest and greatest on Westwater Canyon, Colorado River.

PERFORMANCE PACKRAFTS

Pack it in, step it up

Packrafting's wilderness promise grows a little more tangible each year as these lightweight craft continue to evolve from puncture-prone, glorified inner tubes to tough, ultralight boats ready to take on whitewater in hard-to-reach corners of the backcountry. We recently took two new models for a spin.

AIRE BAKRAFT

(aire.com, $1,299)

Long time raft and inflatable kayak manufacturer AIRE enters the packrafting game with after a two-and-a-half year design collaboration between AIRE founder Greg Ramp and BAKraft founder Cory Walker. The result (*pictured at right*), is essentially a highly portable IK, from its shape right down to the self-bailing floor.

A proprietary fabric helps bring the total weight in down to an impressive six pounds, five ounces, including a multi-functional backrest which also serves as a day-trip-sized drybag and pump. The inflatable floor keeps the boat from folding in waves, and drains a completely swamped cockpit in seconds. It also provides a welcome cushion when bouncing along a rocky river bottom (standard procedure for packrafting expeditions). The BAKraft features an ultralight version of AIRE's signature two-layer bladder-in-shell design, so if too much low-water abuse punctures the outer shell, the inner urethane bladder can be patched.

On the water, the boat proved capable and forgiving. We sent one first-time paddler through several Class III rapids; he came out grinning, and upright. The main drawback for the BAKraft—as with many packrafts—is a lack of gear storage space. The backrest bag helps, but an overnight paddler would likely need to tie a bag across the bow or place it on the floor. Nonetheless, the BAKraft fits the packrafting bill: it's light, tough and surprisingly capable.

ALPACKA ALPACKALYPSE

(alpackawhitewater.com, $2000)

At close to 12 pounds, the Alpackalypse (*pictured at top*) is far from the lightest packraft available, but it blows the others away when it comes to whitewater performance. The tubes zip open, allowing you to store all your gear in the body of the boat itself; this keeps your lap clear and your center of gravity low. Equipped with sprayskirt, footpegs, knee straps and an inflatable hip support system, the boat is easy for a competent kayaker to roll, even in whitewater. "I was able to carve in and out of eddies, even boof," one tester and experienced packrafter said. "I would feel comfortable relying on this boat on remote Class IV. That's something I've never been able say of another packraft." With a $2,000 price tag—thanks in part to Alpacka's expensive but remarkably rugged Kevlar material, designed specifically for the Alpackalypse—this isn't an entry-level boat. But for those addicted to tracing rivers through blank spots on the map, it could be a game changer. – *Zak Podmore*

The BAKraft's lines give away its IK heritage.

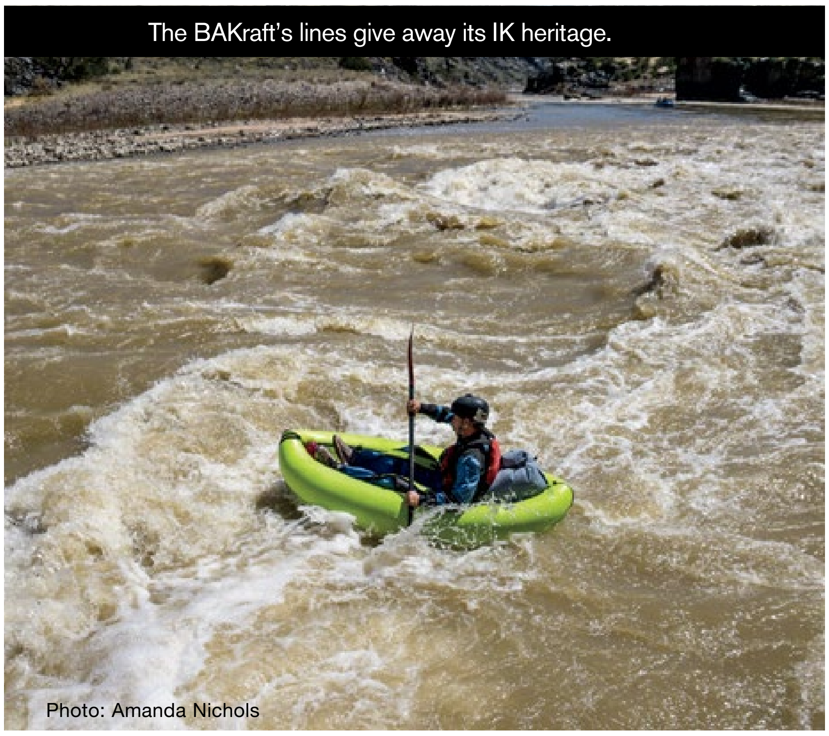

Photo: Amanda Nichols

Photo: Aaron Schmidt

PACK & PLAY

3 innovative boats to get you outta town, fast

SEA EAGLE RAZORLITE 393RL

L: 12’10”; W: 28”; 28 lbs., 500-lb. cap.; Packable size: 22 x 22 x 12 inch.
($1,099 with paddle; seaeagle.com)

Sea Eagle has shattered the inflatable kayak mold with the sleek and light new RazorLite 393RL—the first inflatable kayak to use drop-stitch construction in all chambers. The air chambers are reinforced with a mesh of high-tensile threads, which allows the boat to be inflated to more than twice the pressure most IK’s run. Add a relatively svelte 28” width and rigid plastic bow and stern caps that give the boat a hydrodynamic double-concave entry profile, and you get the fastest, most-responsive inflatable touring boat we’ve tested. And at 28 pounds, it’s lightweight as well.

This isn’t your daddy’s IK, with pontoon hulls and unshakable primary stability. With its flat bottom and relatively high thin side compartments, the RazorLite has an almost canoe-like profile, with ample storage for anything from camping gear to dogs (Sea Eagle will soon release the 16-foot Travel Canoe using similar drop stitch construction).

On the water, the RazorLite feels more like a hardshell recreational touring kayak, and its performance is comparable to that class of boat in most respects. Our decidedly unscientific speed comparison (an editor in the RazorLite and a photographer in a 14-foot touring boat, both racing the setting sun) put the RazorLite in the same league as hardshell kayaks of similar length. Tracking is arrow-straight, thanks to a removable skeg just aft of the seat.

The RazorLite is a fun boat to paddle. The narrower profile allows a higher-angle paddling stroke, and you can even put the boat on edge to release the skeg and turn more quickly. The outfitting, however, is designed more for comfort and quick setup than performance. The clip-in seat is comfortable for easy cruising, though the high back inhibits more aggressive paddling. The footrest is a length of webbing inside a piece of plastic tubing. It clips quickly into a pair of D-rings in the hull.

Setup is a dream. One advantage of the drop-stitch construction, in addition to improved rigidity, is that the RazorLite uses thinner chambers that require less air to inflate. The included high-volume pump, complete with in-line pressure gauge, makes short work of the inflation chore. Five minutes after first opening the box, we were on the water having fun. Takedown is just as easy, though the RazorLite has the annoying habit of trapping water and sand in the seams between chambers. The boat and all the included accessories—pump, seat, footrest, repair kit and four-piece paddle—fit easily inside the included rucksack, ready for your next adventure at the town beach or the other side of the world.–*JM*

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Kayak Cart-Beach
12” durable Polyurethane balloon wheels: a must for sand.

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Features	Wheeleez	Others
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Marine-Grade, anodized aluminum	YES	No
Stainless-Steel hardware	YES	No
Non-corrosive Bearings/Bushings	YES	No

See kayak cart comparison page.

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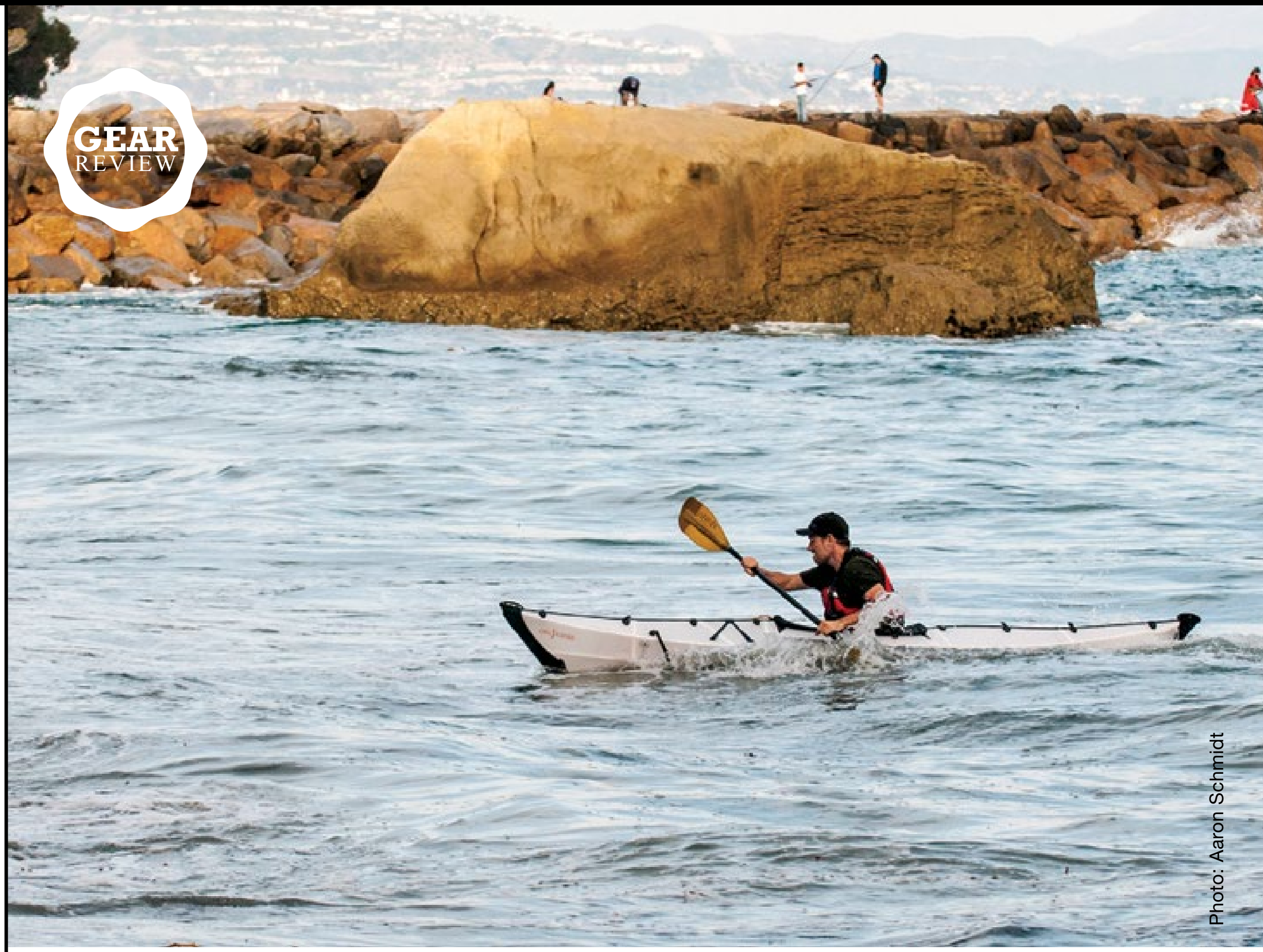
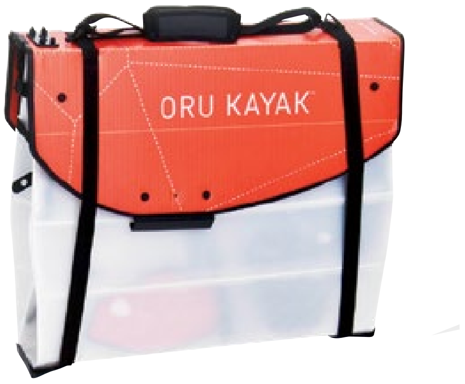


Photo: Aaron Schmidt

ORU KAYAK BAY+

L: 12′; W: 25″; 28 lbs., 300-lb. cap.; Packable size: 32 x 28 x 13 inches. ($1,495, orukayak.com)

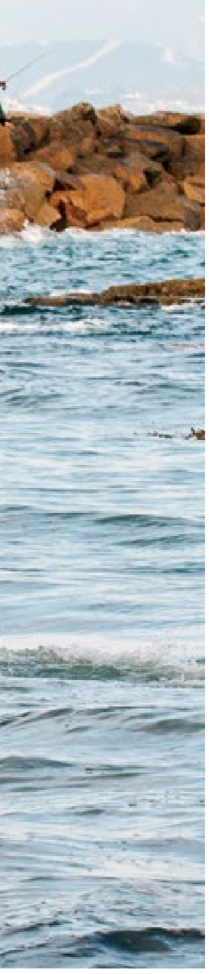


Oru Kayaks redefined "folding boats" with this origami-inspired design. Rather than a stack of frame components and a separate skin, the Oru is one artfully folded piece of corugated polypropylene--the stuff postal tote bins are made of. The whole boat packs George Jetson-style to the size of an artist's portfolio.

It was an idea whose time had come. The company's 2012 Kickstarter campaign raised $444,000, and a 2013 appearance on ABC's Shark Talk led to another investment that streamlined Oru's California manufacturing base.

While the story of Oru's viral start has been told many times, little has been written about its performance on the water. We got our hands on the Bay+, Oru's latest version, which offers a few notable next-gen upgrades to the original Bay's innovative platform, including an adjustable seat, screw-off day hatch, stainless-steel ratcheting buckles and extra deck-rigging. The first test of any folding boat is assembly. The man method—straight out of the box, ignoring all instructions—yielded a first assembly time of 20 minutes. Not bad. The next setup, with instructions and practice, took 10 minutes.

Despite the lack of rocker and a flat hull profile under the seat, the 12-foot Bay+ tracks well and responds to engaged-edge turns with the surprising ease of a longer traditional touring kayak. (Not that you need to drop an edge; the craft's feather-weight makes tight turns and instant acceleration a cinch.) Though the cockpit is snugger and the deck much lower than typical flat-water cruising kayaks, the Oru delivers unexpected comfort with its supportive high-back seat and knees nested on the edges of the padded seat platform. The single foot bar, though adjustable from the cockpit, is about the only integrated outfitting feature that suffers from minimalism, leaving you wanting more. The other slight drawback to the hull's clever single-piece design is the bow-to-stern seam where the ends meet on the top deck. Eight ratchet points ensure that the edges nest firmly into a line



of plastic runners, though not without slight gaps—the seal isn't watertight, though it's more than capable of shedding splashes over the bow. An advantage of that long seam is the ease of loading gear into the wide-open bow and stern sections, both divided by bulkhead plates to aid rigidity (also not watertight). While packing regular kayak hatches often feels like trying to stuff your lunch into a birdhouse, loading the Oru is more like sliding a sandwich into a ziplock bag.

And it is a solid ride, where, once the gee-whiz novelty of assembly wears off, you're left with a fun, nimble and versatile light-touring option that tops the charts when you factor storage and transport.

– DS

Photo: Kevin Arnold

DAGGER ROAM

L: 9'9"; W: 31.5"; 56 lbs., 250-lb. max cap. (also available in an 11.5' length)

($855, dagger.com)

Dagger's new Roam is a rare beast: a sit-on-top kayak made for moderate whitewater. The design blends massive primary stability with surprising edging performance, rendering it capable of Class III waters.

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— Joe Jackson

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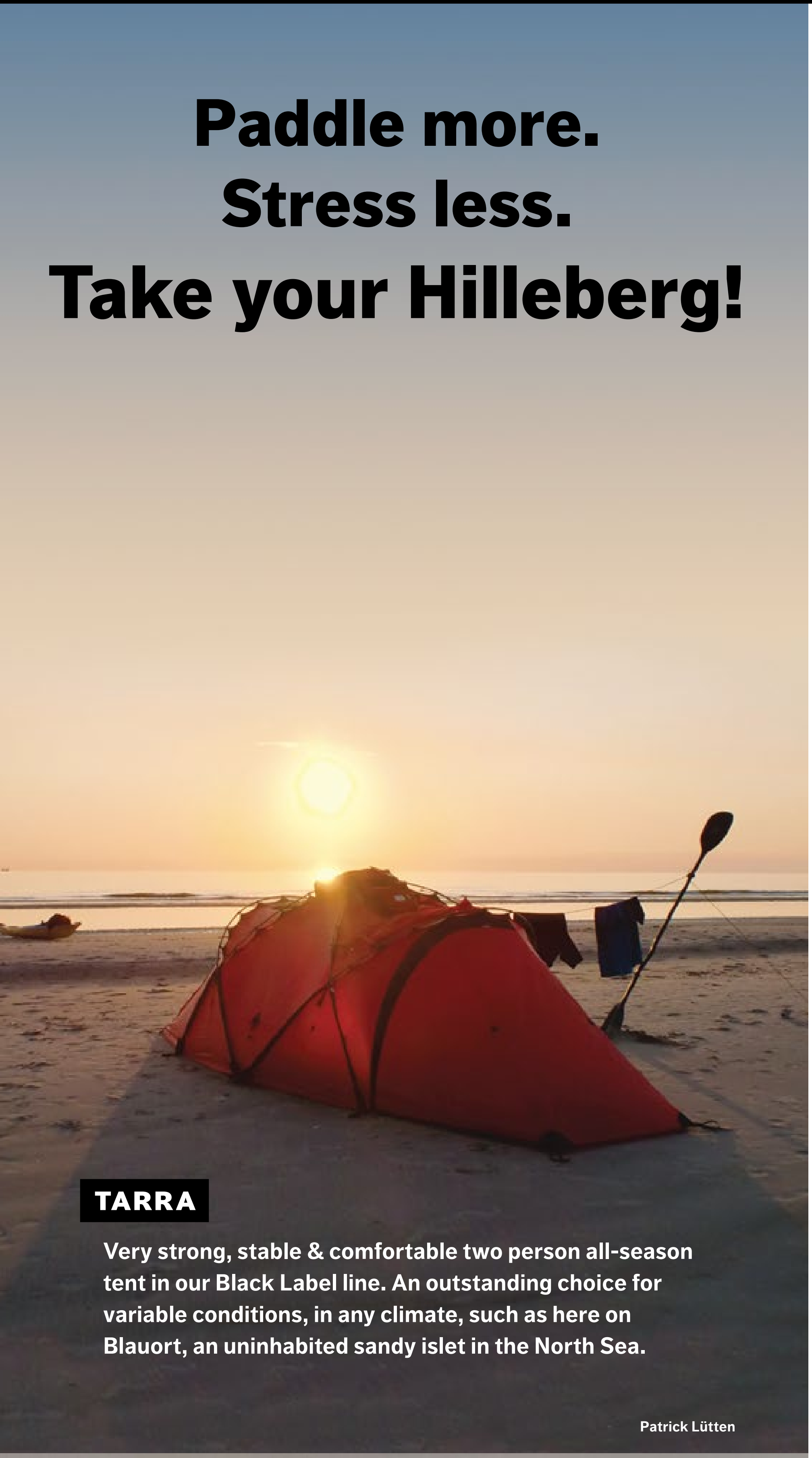

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Nathan has already been apprised of my mission to reconnect with the waterways of my youth and he has prepared a very accommodating multi-hour trip that takes place in early evening, when the stultifying heat moderates slightly.

We put in at lovely Riverview Park, where Canoe Kentucky operates a rental concession.

“We’ve come a long way,” says Nathan. “Historically, the Kentucky River has been ignored. It was viewed as a place to dump trash and to release sewage. In the past three or four years, there has been an aggressive effort to increase awareness of the potential of the river. The town brought in an engineer to develop a master plan, which includes additional green space, trails, an amphitheater and retail space. There has also been an increased effort to educate people about the importance and potential of having a beautiful river flowing right through the middle of your town.”

> ***“ABOUT 13 DIFFERENT KINDS OF INTENSE HELL WERE SIMULTANEOUSLY BREAKING LOOSE, AND AT THE EPICENTER OF THE STORM WAS MY MOTHER, LOSING HER GODDAMNED MIND.”***

Beautiful is right. The riverbanks are steep and verdant. It’s hard to tell what color the water actually is, because it is so calm that it serves as a mirror for the wall of green that frames its circuitous course. When I lived in Frankfort, the Kentucky River was so polluted that most parents would not allow their kids to so much as stick a big toe into its flow. Effluent was discharged untreated. The many bourbon distilleries that line its shores were not, shall we say, highly regulated. Refuse of every variety imaginable floated down toward the Ohio River.

Thankfully, like many once-poisoned rivers, the Kentucky’s fortunes have improved as environmental-preservation regulations have increased. Wildlife—deer, turkey, coyote, beaver and muskrat—abounds. Nathan lets his three children play in the river, which is a rich fishery, without compunction.

Though our three-hour itinerary runs through the middle of Frankfort, because of the city’s historic indifference toward the river and the lushness of the proximate terrain, it feels semi-wild. Shortly after we put in, we pass the junction of the Kentucky River and Benson Creek, the site of a “ford” named after Stephen Frank, who, legend has it, was killed by Indians in the 1780s. The original name of Frank’s Ford became bastardized over the years.

Nathan, a proud born-and-raised Kentuckian, is a veritable font of pertinent skinny. Though he is conversant in history- and natural-history-speak, he seems most excited by what is happening here and now along the Kentucky River.

“What we’re trying to do is to get this section of the Kentucky River established as a linear national park,” Nathan says, eyes a-gleaming. “There’s a lot of effort being put into renovating the

14 locks. The first four are still operational. The long-term goal is to get portage trails built on locks 1-14. Our hope is to make it so that for the first time in many years, you will be able to paddle all the way from Frankfort to the Ohio River."

As we make our way upstream, we pass the grave of Daniel Boone, the Frankfort Boat Dock and several small private marinas. We pass close by the Kentucky State Capitol and reach our turnaround point: Melody Landing. When I lived in Frankfort, this was a summertime gathering place for local youth. Though it was not "developed" per se, it nonetheless sported a recreational feature that, these days, would have child protection organizations shitting their pants. It was a rope swing and it was the highest, most-fearsome rope swing in history. Legend had it that it first came into being early in the 20th century after a record flood raised the level of the Kentucky River so significantly that it overflowed banks more than 100 feet high. At that time, some visionary decided to bolt off a long section of telephone-pole guywire to the uppermost branches of a very tall tree. To that guy wire was attached a long section of thick chain. To that was attached a long section of the kind of heavy rope found in high school gyms.

The result of that praiseworthy engineering effort was a gravity-based catapult that was so heavy, a single kid could not by his or her lonesome drag it to the top of the riverbank, where were located the remnants of an old stone wall, otherwise known as the launching point. It was a rite of passage for the young people of Frankfort to grab hold of the rope and g-force themselves out above the Kentucky River, where a momentum-enhanced plunge of more than 50 feet awaited them.

Once we arrived at Melody, I was saddened, but not surprised, to see that the swing was gone. From the looks of the undergrowth, it had been gone a long time. Nathan not only had never heard about the swing, but he seemed somewhat dubious when I related tales of near-terminal belly-flops and impacts so severe that bathing suits were often removed by sudden deceleration.

He seemed even more dubious when I told him the real reason why I wanted to paddle to Melody Landing.

Her name was … well, now that I think about it, it would be injudicious of me to relate her name. We had been classmates for several years and, during that time, she had developed a reputation for being mature beyond her years, if you get my drift. I, like every hormone-raging lad of my age, had spent considerable time lusting after this particular young lady, who was, to her eternal credit, a devotee of the most mini of miniskirts. Sadly, though our social circles overlapped somewhat, she never even pondered the notion of giving me the time of day. She was much coveted by older boys who would have been more than willing to pummel someone like me to death should I unwisely try to elbow my way onto their figurative turf. Yet—miracle of miracles!—during my last summer in Frankfort, I found myself at Melody Landing with this lady. It was then and there, right in the middle of the river upon which I now am paddling, that I lost my virginity, standing upright, bobbing in the warm embrace of water that, in those days, was likely polluted to the point of toxicity.

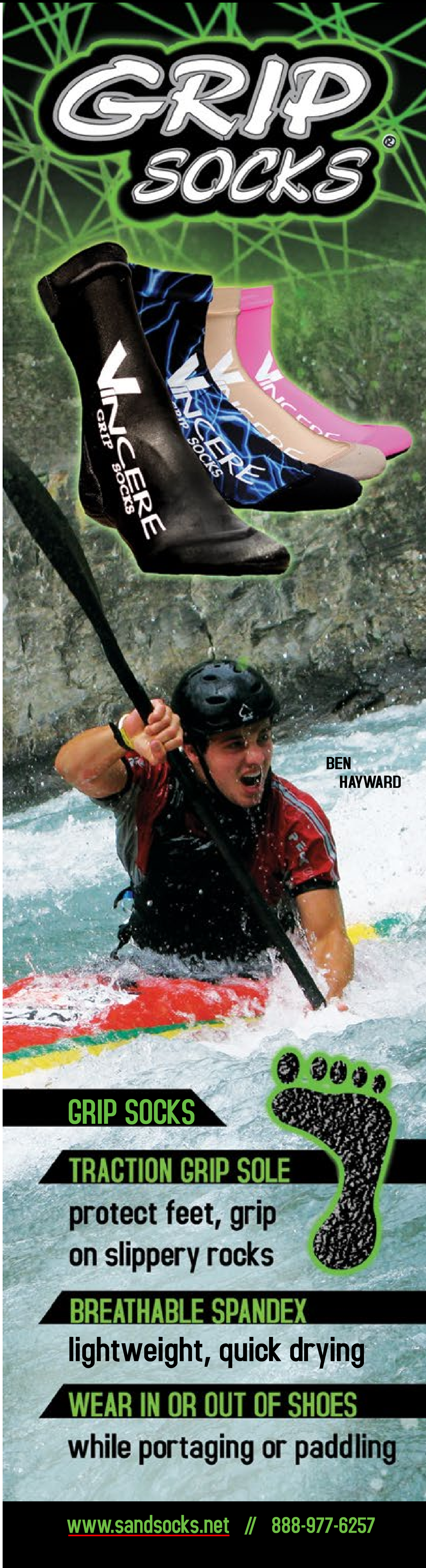
I do not know whatever happened to that young lady. I reached into the tepid water and pulled a handful toward my mouth and hoped against hope that her life had turned out as well as mine has.

III

DRAGON RUN

"*We drive into the future using only our rearview mirror.*"
— Philosopher Marshall McLuhan

At last, I drove my 4Runner to the place, more than any other, that I describe as "where I am from": Gloucester County, Virginia, one of the most-historic locales in what is now the United States. Across the York River from Williamsburg and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Yorktown, this is the birthplace of Pocahontas. This is where the Colonial army was bivouacked before the final battle of the Revolutionary War. George Washington really *did* sleep here, as the maternal grandmother of our first president owned a local plantation called Warner Hall, where, I guess I should note, I actually once lived (in the guest cottage). It was my last residence before I moved West, just as the tall ships were entering American territorial waters in celebration of the nation's Bicentennial.

From the get-go, I hated every single thing about Gloucester County. I absolutely could not *believe* that this muggy, tick-infested jungle was now home sweet home. My sweat-filled days were spent swatting saltwater mosquitoes and longing for the day when I could move far, far away.

There was, however, one good thing. Though it often stuns my contemporary reprobate amigos to learn this, for two years, I was the Senior Patrol Leader of what was then the largest rural troop in the entire country: Troop 111, which was also the nation's third-oldest troop.

> ***"MELODY LANDING SPORTED A RECREATIONAL FEATURE THAT, THESE DAYS, WOULD HAVE CHILD PROTECTION ORGANIZATIONS SH*TTING THEIR PANTS. IT WAS A ROPE SWING AND IT WAS THE HIGHEST, MOST-FEARSOME ROPE SWING IN HISTORY"***

There were of course many positive aspects that came from being a member of a large, active Boy Scout troop. I learned about teamwork and camaraderie. I learned how to straight-faced lie through my teeth about being brave, clean and reverent. I learned how to properly tie up Tenderfoot Scouts, which made smearing peanut butter in their hair much easier. Eventually, I even learned how to roll a joint with one hand on a wet and windy day.

But at the top of that list was the fact that Troop 111, which was sponsored by the affluent Men's Club of Ware Episcopal Church, the oldest Episcopal Parish in America, owned a shitload of canoes. We were considered the best canoe troop in Virginia and maybe even in the world. While on an extended car trip to Oregon one summer, Troop 111 took on an entire Scout camp in Wyoming in a two-man flatwater canoe race and took first, second, third, fourth and sixth. There were 10 members of Troop 111 competing against a pool of several hundred suddenly very-humbled Wyomingites. Though I never cracked the top tier of canoeists in Troop 111, osmosis alone made it impossible not to become a competent paddler. We had the boats, we had the teachers, we had the peer pressure and we had the entirety of the vast Chesapeake Bay and its limitless waterways upon which to practice.

One of those estuaries was a freshwater stream called the Dragon Run, which eventually flows into the tidal Piankatank River, which, in turn, flows into the Chesapeake.

There is some dispute regarding how the Dragon Run came to be so named. One school of thought contends it was a fairly innocuous naming process based upon nothing more than the stream's serpentine path. Another possibility is darker: This area was, until the end of the Civil War (or the War of Northern Aggression, as it is known in these parts), slave country. It is said that local plantation owners tried to convince their slaves that it would be foolish to try to escape because the area was inhabited by, you guessed it, dragons. Either way, this sinewy tributary marked the closest thing Gloucester County had to terra incognita. Everything else was civilized to death and had been for centuries.

Over Christmas break during my senior year of high school, with two canoes "borrowed" from Troop 111, four of us embarked on a jaunt down the upper reaches of the Dragon Run that ended up being far more than the sum of its adventuresome parts. It became a journey of liberation, one that showed four dipshit bumpkins from the swampy middle of nowhere that they could pull a challenging trip out of their asses and go home with the desire to dream up even more challenging trips.

Fayhee with guide Shannon Alexander

That section of the Dragon Run was clogged with blow-downs and beaver dams. We spent almost as much time dragging the canoes over and around obstacles as we did paddling. And we weren't exactly wearing state-of-the-art, moisture-wicking, insulating attire. More like blue jeans, flannel shirts, cotton long johns and canvas Keds. The first night, we had so much trouble finding solid ground upon which to camp that there was a distinct possibility we would have to bunk down in the canoes, which would have been rough, considering how wet and cold we were.

Three days later, we emerged at the takeout on U.S. Highway 17 seriously beat up and exhausted. Our legs were battered, bruised and scraped raw from banging against submerged trunks and branches as we walked our well-laden boats through tree-choked, opaque water. We were undoubtedly well on our way to hypothermia. And the canoes we had borrowed from Troop 111 were, to say the least, worse for wear.

But that trip—ill conceived, poorly executed, uncomfortable, and, because the Dragon Run traverses nothing but private land, illegal—taught those same four bumpkins two interrelated lessons that each contain kernels of literalness and metaphor: First, if you keep paddling, you will eventually reach your destination; but, second, once you do reach your destination, the trip is over and what awaits you is a return to real life.

Shannon Alexander asked why I was

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Coyote built and photographed by David Wohl

suddenly smiling.

"Just happy to be heading out onto the water," I responded truthfully.

Shannon, the proprietor of Bay Country Kayaking, had nixed the notion of trying to replicate the route I took as a senior in high school, citing the same physical obstacles that battered us back in 1973.

Our plan, then, was to paddle from the point where the Dragon Run passes beneath Highway 17 down to the Piankatank, which we would then navigate for several hours to our takeout at Thousand Trails Chesapeake Bay RV Resort, 10 or so meandering miles from the put-in.

Shannon is first and foremost a devotee of estuary ecology. A native of Williamsburg who was raised on the famed Outer Banks, she has an undergraduate degree in environmental science from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and an M.S. in Coastal Zone Management from Nova Southeastern University's Oceanographic Center in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. This lady knows her swamps and salt marshes the way Edward Abbey knew Utah's Slickrock Country. She not only recites the names of the various grasses and bushes; she also groks how the entire system works. She knows which insects are attracted to which tiny flowers and which birds eat those insects and on and on up the food chain. It is pleasant in the extreme to be out in the woods with someone who is in her bionomic element.

The Dragon Run at this point is a thin ribbon of marginally passable, tea-colored water winding its way through the northernmost cypress groves in the country. It is tempting to say that the heavily vegetated banks are close to the point of stifling. But, technically, there are no banks. The John Hartford lyric, "too thick to navigate, too thin to plow," springs to mind.

This part of the Dragon Run is much like it was 400 years ago, when John Smith was running around trying to not get his noggin removed by Chief Powhatan and his braves. Before long, we see a bald eagle and several muskrats. Shannon ticks off faunal and floral species that call the Dragon Run home: the great purple hairstreak butterfly, otters, deer, resurrection ferns, wild iris, featherfoil and spatterdock. I have no earthly idea what those last two species are, but that adds to the overall impression: This is some biologically rich turf. And, according to Shannon, the local landowners are actively involved in trying to keep it that way.

After a few hours, we break out into the wide expanse of the Piankatank and, given the fact that we are now paddling through saltwater, the ecology changes dramatically, from swamp to marsh. Here, the riverbanks are actually mostly land instead of mostly water. We find a dock that's partially submerged because of all the recent rain leading up to what looks to be a hunting cabin where we surreptitiously stop for a snack and to let Casey run. Lots of private property-no trespassing-keep out-violators will be shot on sight signs are spread about.

One of the toughest things to get a grip on in the East is the lack of public land. As one who has long lived where the road maps are swathed in green, this feels foreign. But Shannon points out that, here, it's the water that serves the same purpose as do

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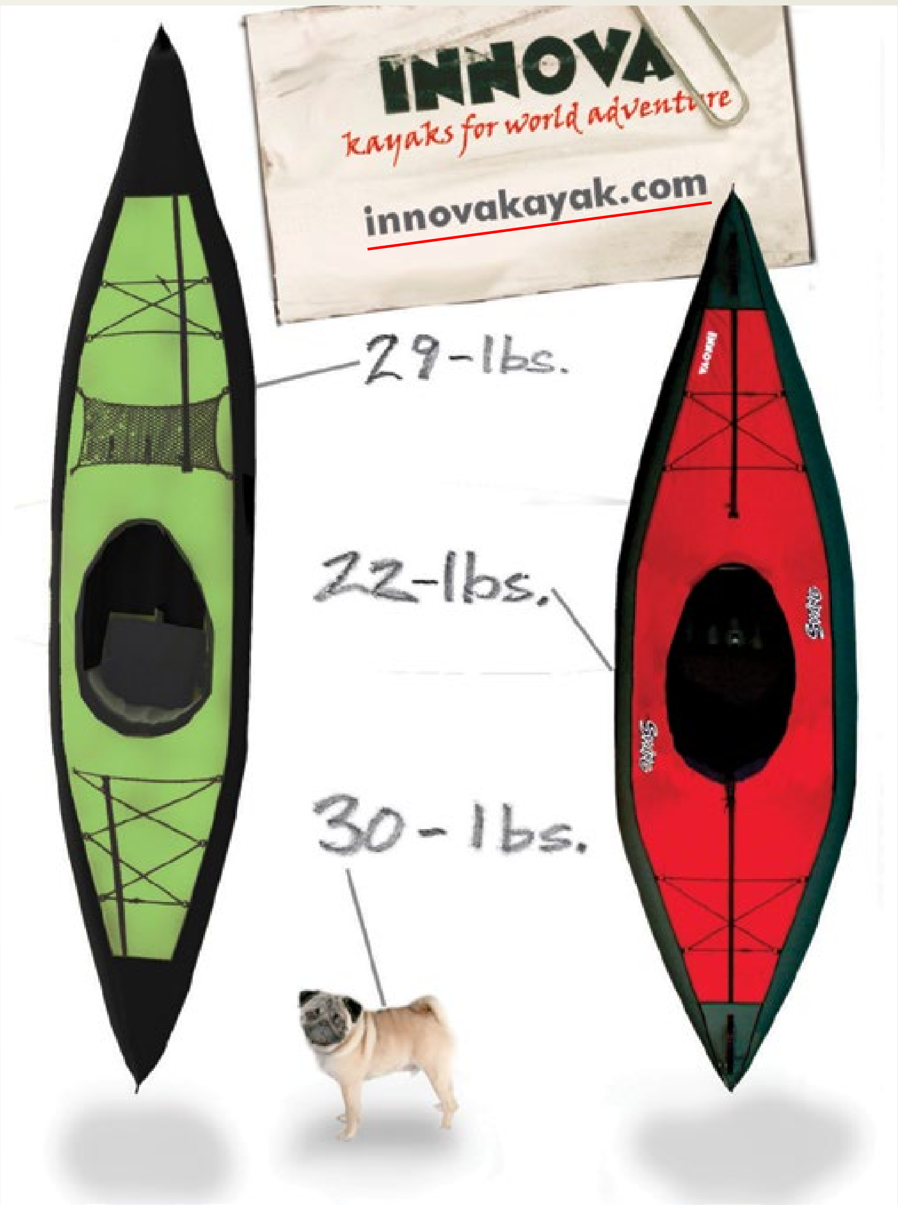
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the national forests and parks out where I live. There are enough public landings scattered around that folks who do not own waterfront property can get their various vessels out onto the rivers and bays.

And, increasingly, Shannon tells me, those vessels include touring kayaks and canoes. Gloucester County is now home to five official blueways, which are described in detail in a brochure that Shannon herself helped produce. The blueways cover the gamut, from novice routes on a freshwater reservoir to expert alternatives that rub elbows with the mighty Chesapeake Bay.

As we approach the very pretty campground, I reach into the Piankatank and draw a small handful of saltwater to my mouth. As I do so, I swear that I will, right now, at this exact moment, forevermore, stop carrying the heavy stereotypes that have burdened me since I frantically put Gloucester County, Virginia, in my rearview mirror 39 years ago.

As we approach the very pretty campground, I reach into the Piankatank and draw a small handful of saltwater to my mouth. As I do so, I swear that I will, right now, at this exact moment, forevermore, stop carrying the heavy stereotypes that have haunted me since I frantically put Gloucester County, Virginia—and the entire East—in my rearview mirror 39 years ago. There is an undeniable beauty here that, in my haste to head West, I was apparently too distracted to notice, much less appreciate, when I was young.

I have 2,000 miles to contemplate the role these waterways—Lake Champlain, the Kentucky River and the Dragon Run—have played in my trip called life. By the time I arrive back in the Land of Enchantment, the Gila River is swollen from record monsoon rains, and I find I am far more at ease looking in the rearview mirror than I have ever been before.

– M. John Fayhee was for 13 years the editor of the Mountain Gazette. He is the author of 11 books, including 'Smoke Signals: Wayward Journeys through the Old Heart of the New West' and 'Bottoms Up.' He lives in Silver City, New Mexico.

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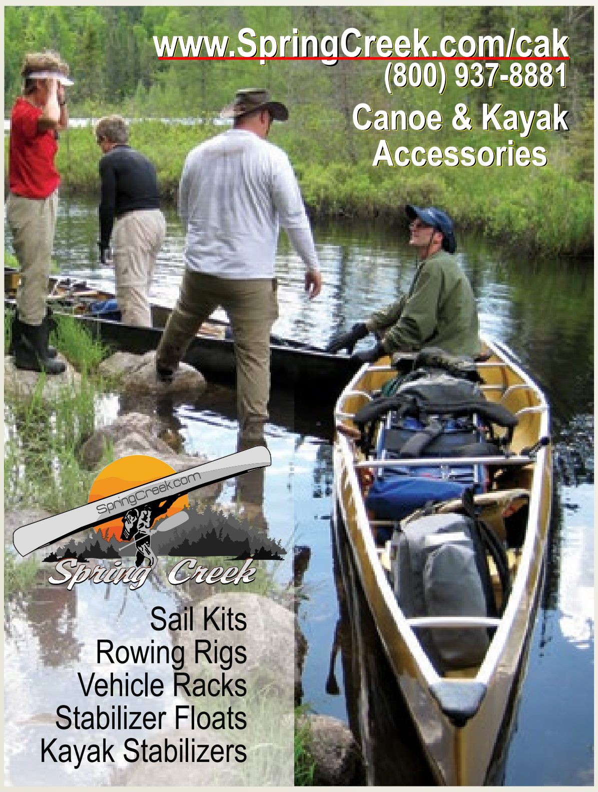
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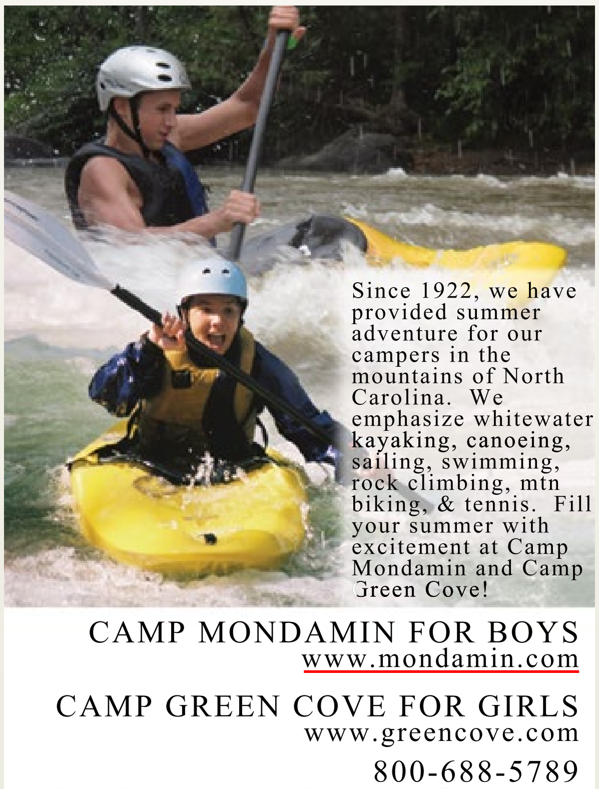
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NORM MILLER

THE MISSOURI RIVER SOURCE

BY DAVE SHIVELY

Norm Miller was on a ladder cleaning windows last June in Livingston, Mont., when he got a text from Mike Comer, who was paddling the length of the Missouri River. Keith Lynch, who had just set off to canoe from Montana home to Dallas, was in trouble.

"The text says, 'Keith just flipped. He lost all his gear,'" recalls Miller, who grabbed his canoe and spent the next two days searching for the floating wreckage with Comer and Lynch. They recovered most, minus a drybag carrying $4,000 worth of camera equipment, and Lynch continued downriver.

Miller met both voyagers through a Facebook group that he created 10 years ago for people who wanted to paddle the length of the Big Muddy. He never imagined the page would yield a decade of adventures, lasting friendships, and collaboration as America's longest river experienced a sudden boom in source-to-sea descents. So Miller, 52, spent his weekends searching for that drybag of electronics until he found it, intact, four months later. He overnighted it to Lynch, who was then in St. Louis, and joined him later as he paddled the Trinity River home to Dallas.

Keith Lynch had never been in a canoe before. That's ballsy. I have a photo of him the day he lost his stuff and he looks depressed—that lonely, best-friend-had-died kind of look. Then when I met him in Dallas, it was so cool to see that he'd totally transformed into a paddler, lost 48 pounds, had a full beard and looked weathered like an 18th century explorer.

I've always been led toward the historical trips. Back in '98 I did my first long trip, a two-month, 2,000-mile solo from Ft. McMurray, Alberta north to the Arctic Ocean, following the 1789 route of Alexander Mackenzie when he discovered the Arctic Ocean.

Verlen Kruger and Steve Landick had done part of the route. And once I started planning my trip I drove back home to Michigan, went to Verlen's house. We paddled around and I had him build me a custom Kruger Sea Wind.

He always had a phrase: 'Keep it moving,' that I sort of morphed into, 'One stroke at time.' It's not about where you're going to end up, it's about all the paddle strokes in between.

Because it can be really overwhelming going so slow. Especially upstream, so to do that day in and day out for weeks or months, can get psychologically overwhelming out there in the elements.

I was in 10th grade when it felt like some day, I was going to retrace the Lewis and Clark trail, St. Louis to the Pacific. I finally started in March 2004.

Every three days I'd write about what I saw and experienced for a 200-year comparison from their journal with my trip. Two weeks into trip felt like I went into this time portal to the 1800s.

I was gone for 199 days total. And yeah, it was life changing.

It was really hard to come back and adjust, working 9 to 5 and mowing the yard. I actually went into therapy and counseling for a whole year. I wanted to just continue paddling and wanted to be camping the rest of my life.

I paddled the coast of Thailand to the border of Malaysia in 2010. That was my last long solo trip. Now I try to get out every weekend on the Yellowstone or Missouri or Madison River.

The source-to-sea record for North America's longest river system, that first known descent by Mark Kalch, was in 2012. This entire record has slipped by the paddling world with people planning descents in obscure rivers in South America, spending astronomical amounts of money. You can just leave from right here in the middle of the U.S. and paddle for 100-200 days.

The Upper Missouri's lakes, psychologically, can drain the shit out of you, especially if you're stuck wind-bound. That's part of reason that nine people did the whole Missouri last year and 50 did the entire Mississippi.

It's awesome to experience a place you've never been. When I paddled through South Dakota it felt like I was in Ireland—lush, green and wide open—phenomenally beautiful.

Dave Miller's *Complete Paddler* is like the bible to paddling the Missouri, and the Facebook group is an addition to his book.

I'm the moderator and we're at over 900 and accelerating. They all become a giant river angel network. They'll help you portage a dam, maybe give you a ride to town or a warm shower, or go grocery shopping with or for you.

Some of these people, including myself, have done big trips and they just want to live their trip over again by helping out as a way of paying back the next paddler.

We're doing an August gathering, paddling the last 200 miles to St. Louis and then borrowing the reconstructed Lewis and Clark fort of Camp Dubois for a final rendezvous how they used to do in the 1800s. All these people I've met over the last six to eight years, we'll all be together, paddling.

photograph by REID MORTH

Gates AuSable
Lodge
Grayling, MI

LIGHT AND CHEAP ON THE TAT-ALSEK

STORY & PHOTOS BY JOHN NESTLER

The Tatshenshini through Dalton Post, Yukon, is an unassuming stream. Not exactly the "eyegasm" coined in the guidebook we'd read on the drive up from Haines. Zane, Sam and I have read plenty of trip reports framing the Tatshenshini and Alsek rivers downstream as one of the most magnificent river trips in North America.

The three of us, college paddling buddies, were graduating and going separate directions. So we decided to mount the fastest, cheapest trip we could to see the Tat-Alsek's elusive beauty for ourselves. That meant opting for inflatable kayaks to keep transport easy (and to forgo raft-rental costs), and taking the only available—meaning the earliest—permitted launch.

Typically no one launches in late May, when this corner of the North, in which the Yukon-British Columbia border runs into Southeast Alaska, is only beginning to thaw. But as we put on, the sun radiates, increasing the flow as tributaries deposit crystal water.

If rivers have personalities, the Tat struggles with multiple: A narrow canyon of frothing whitewater gives way to a calmer river that meanders 140 miles to the Pacific, where the only thing that continues to intensify is the expansive wilderness scenery.

Snow-capped mountains taunt us. Bear sign is everywhere—scat and scratched trees. The three of us review our encounter strategies. With only two cans of bear spray between us, the rehearsals never end well.

It doesn't help that we're chumming the water. Without a cooler, we chill our perishables in a submerged drybag—like a drag bag, but full of pungent, bear-tempting meat instead of beer.

We try not to think about the bears. We focus instead on the the grand symphony of this river journey, with its staccato opening, gentle melodies, and ever-increasing tempo. The crescendo comes at the confluence with the Alsek, where glaciated mountains encompass a mile-wide expanse of braided river channels. Here we feel truly small.

Bald eagles perch on the gravel bars, scanning a barren landscape made hazy from wind whipping sand upstream. Twenty-foot-tall icebergs block our path through Alsek Lake. Rainy coastal clouds and fog close in to mark the crux of our passage.

Forty-eight hours of continuous rain dampen our spirits and chill us to the bone. We line our IKs around the lake's shore, breaking through small ice floes. The sun finally returns on our 12th day, when we take out in Dry Bay.

As we drag our boats up a shallow tree-lined channel to an airstrip rendezvous with our pilot, a massive grizzly blocks our path. It doesn't charge, but neither does it flinch. The bear, grown accustomed to scraps from the nearby fish processing plant, sniffs us thoroughly before sauntering back into the woods.

I don't stop shaking until the plane is in the air. As I watch the vast and rugged landscape scroll below, I realize that nothing could have prepared me for experiencing a river of such inconceivable beauty that does indeed lie just downstream of Dalton Post.

— Check out a short film from the trip at CanoeKayak.com

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